

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church—UU
“The Social Gospel”
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March 7, 2010

Introduction

One of my favorite passages of Scripture is found in the Old Testament. It is found in the 58th Chapter of Isaiah. It expresses better than I can the heart of my message this morning--the theology of the Social Gospel. In our hymnal it is titled, "To Loose the Fetters of Injustice":

Is not this the fast that I choose:

To loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke!

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house,
when you see them naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then
shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; if you
remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer
your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, you shall be like a watered
garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.

History

The Social Gospel movement was a late nineteenth century, mainly American Protestant movement, that stressed Christian social action. Its roots were in the humanitarian and anti-slavery activities of the Unitarians and especially the transcendentalists earlier in the century. It was a reaction against exaggerated forms of American individualism and unrestrained capitalism which American churches were frequently accused of supporting.

This religious movement advocated gradual social reforms based on the belief in the general goodness of human nature and susceptibility to the forces of moral persuasion. The leading advocates of this Social Gospel were Horace Bushnell, Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch. The high point of the movement resulted in the founding of what became the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (1908).

The movement also received inspiration from Charles Kingsley and F.D. Maurice in England, and Germans Protestants Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf von Harnack, and Roman Catholic John Ryan. It drew upon the theological and biblical foundations for a social ethic. These theologians were critical of priests in the Old Testament who were more concerned about correct ritual and not social relations. These priests promoted staying in favor with God by ritual cleansing and social sacrifices.

What the Social Gospelers preferred is the prophets of the Old Testament who insisted on the inseparability of religion and ethics. These prophets, like Amos in the reading this morning, criticized ritual as a substitute for justice. They believed that God places demands on each of us in our personal, national and international relations. They argued that Jesus spoke in this prophetic tradition, refusing to separate the love of God from love of one's neighbor. The God of the Social Gospelers was especially concerned about the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger.

My Experience

When I was in Divinity School at Duke in the late 60's the Social Gospel was alive and well. Inspired by the Civil Rights decade before, the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., many of us saw our ministry as freeing society from the fetters of injustice.

This was my gospel in 1972 when I graduated from theological school. In the years preceding graduation I considered many social gospel types of ministries: industrial and prison chaplaincy were my dreams. But these kinds of ministries were hard to fund and we were in a mild recession, so they were far and few between. So I hoped that I could find a church that would support such a ministry. I looked around the country and found such a ministry in a Methodist Church in Richmond, Virginia.

I found the members of my Methodist church in one of many camps. Some were concerned that I do the ritual the right way, that I wear the right clothes. Others were concerned that I was reborn, and thus would be saved. It is not a good thing when the members of a church are praying for their minister to be saved. A few wanted me to live the just life. These people were motivated by the Social Gospel.

It was during this period that I was introduced to Unitarian Universalism. A member of my young adult class had visited the church in Richmond and gave it raved reviews. I was especially impressed that these people seemed to live their principles.

So I researched it more and quickly decided it was the church for me. Though I didn't know much about the Unitarian Universalists while in divinity school, I did know about the Social Gospel movement. I studied this movement and saw myself committed to its goals.

Walter Rauschenbusch

My favorite Social Gospeler is Walter Rauschenbusch who was born in Rochester, New York in October of 1861 and died in 1918. He was a graduate and later a professor of Rochester Theological Seminary in New York. He was ordained a Baptist in 1886 and his first church was in midst of a German immigrant community in New York City. Rauschenbusch was profoundly impressed by the effect of the Industrial Revolution on the lives of these German immigrants, especially the depression of 1893.

Hell's Kitchen

Rauschenbusch wrote several books expressing his Social Gospel. The first was titled, "Christianity and the Social Crisis" written in 1907 and the second, "The Social Principles of Jesus" in 1916. The purpose of the first book he said was "to discharge a debt" to "the working people," people he had served for eleven years just north of the area called, "Hell's Kitchen."

I have never been to Hell's Kitchen, but I think I know what it was like. Let me tell you a story to illustrate Hell's Kitchen. I was playing golf on the Old Course in St. Andrews Scotland. My playing partners had a caddie. I was proud of the round I was playing. I hadn't hit a ball into those dreaded sand-traps of St. Andrew. As I was completing the round I thought it would be a great success if I avoided all the traps.

I said to one of the caddies: "If you see me aimed at one of those traps, would you let me know?" He shook his head affirmatively. It didn't take long for him to see one coming. I took aim at my second shot on the 14th hole, a par five. I heard this "uh um" from behind me. I stopped and looked back. It was that caddie. He said, "You are aiming straight for Hell's Bunker." I aimed to the right and noticed that my ball just avoided the trap that caused Jack Nicklaus to take a nine one year. I bought the caddie a pint in a local pub after the game for that one piece of advice. Let me tell you, you don't want to be in Hell's Kitchen or Hell's Bunker. Let me put it this way, when you are playing golf one of the things you don't like to do it have to aim in the opposite direction from the green in order to keep from digging a whole straight into hell. That is what you have to do in Hell's Bunker. Hell's Kitchen is an example of the many places in our culture where individuals have to go backwards before they can go forwards. They are at a distinct disadvantage from birth.

When Rauschenbusch saw the lives of the immigrants in Hell's Kitchen, he said these circumstances called for faithful witness and transformative work. By the time the book was published, he was now teaching at the conservative Rochester seminary. He wondered what the response to his book would be. First he found that his book became a best seller. It outsold every religious book and went into multiple printings. It was reviewed in all the popular journals and church periodicals, and major newspapers across the land. By his supporters it was seen as a timely response to a growing social condition. To his critics it was seen as false, socialist doctrine. He was fortunate that his seminary defended his right to write his books on the social dimensions of the Gospel.

This book, like its author, was clearly ahead of its time. It supported a minimum wage, the right to a job, compensation for job-related disability, death and sick benefits, maternity care for working women; it called for inspection of working conditions, organization of labor, prohibition of child labor for children under 14, the limitation of labor to eight hour days for young people under 18, the exclusion of the young from night labor and hazardous employment, old-age pensions, improved care for the aged, improved housing, labor co-

partnerships with capital and profit-sharing, and tax reform, the extension of education, libraries, parks and playgrounds.

Rauschenbusch provided a blueprint for liberalism in the 20th century. He challenged "laissez-faire" individualism and Social Darwinism. Inspired by the life of Jesus, Rauschenbusch said the primary purpose of the Gospel is "a thorough regeneration and reconstitution of social life." If we really applied the ethical principles of Jesus, we could change the world. To read Rauschenbusch is to see the value of human life no matter how lowly it may seem. If you read his "Social Principles" you will see a heart that pours out to all people: the worth of a child, the humanity of a leper, the bringing back of the outcast, concern for the delinquent. All of this inspired by the man Jesus. He said, Jesus,

... affirmed the humane instinct consciously and intelligently, and raised it to the dignity of a social principle. This alone would be enough to mark him out as a new type, prophetic and creative of a new development of the race... The respect of Jesus for every concrete person whom he met was due to his religious insight into human life and destiny. (p. 9)

Looking to the early church, the Social Gospellers believed the church had revolutionary power. It was a model for the modern church: spread across the poorer classes and cutting across lines of kinship, race and national boundaries. Rauschenbusch saw the early church as a community that took care of widows and orphans, and responded to the needs of strangers, the aged, the sick and the poor. It also gave a sense of equality to women and a sense of worth to slaves.

What happened to this model type of church? According to Rauschenbusch it was supplanted by a hierarchical church that became more concerned with ritual and ceremony than it did about human lives. "The democratic spirit disappeared from churches as they copied the centralized, hierarchical organizations of princes and empires." What we see in the Social Gospellers is an attempt to return to the original purpose of the church--to awaken the social conscience. Like the Unitarians and the Universalists of the 19th century, they wanted to apply the principles of Christianity to the world around them--reforming the limited democracy that did not give African-Americans and women the right to vote, calling for government leaders to treat more humanely prisoners and the mentally ill.

If Dorothea Dix were alive when Rauschenbusch preached his social gospel, she surely would have been a part of his religious army. Theodore Parker, and Clara Barton, would have responded as well. They were all concerned about the dehumanizing conditions that came along with the Industrial Revolution. The Social Gospellers asserted that the disparity of the social classes in America meant that the courts and other institutions had become tools of the dominant class. Legislators responded to the wealthy and not to the needs of the poor. So it was up to religious leaders to speak for them. They were also critical of a system that depended on the generosity of a few to take care of the social needs of many. They felt that in a just society, all the people's needs would be taken care of.

A church with a conscience could not remain neutral. An ascetic-monastic withdrawal from the world would be wrong. The church must either condemn the world or seek to change it. The other option, not one Rauschenbusch wanted to consider, was to conform to the world in despair. This would result in both a just society and the church going down together. The only option was to call for America to repent of its social sins, and to work toward a better, more just society. The pulpit would play a leading role, singling out the villains among us. The preacher, said Rauschenbusch,

... who really follows the mind of Christ. . . will be likely to take the side of the poor. Such a minister will be able to mediate between conflicting classes by infusing a moral spirit into the struggles of the oppressed and by raising the consciousness of the comfortable about the grievances of the working people. (Douglas Ottati, p. xxiii)

What Happened to the Social Gospel?

What happened after Rauschenbusch died? Why didn't our society continue down the path of being concerned about the poor? The answer is quite simple: Two World Wars! The energy of America turned away

from a war against social evil, to fight against the evils of political and military expansion across the ocean. The theology of the Social Gospel would also be challenged. The Social Gospelers, like their Unitarian and Universalist forebears, believed that humans were basically good, not evil. They preached the worth and dignity of every person. This theology did not fit well into the world scene that produced a Hitler or a Mussolini.

A new theology would emerge. It would be called "neo-orthodoxy." Reinhold Niebuhr would espouse a new Christian realism. In some ways Niebuhr respected the role played by Rauschenbusch, but he would also challenge his optimism. He said that Rauschenbusch like most liberals had a shallow doctrine of sin and reduced love to a simple social doctrine and therefore took an overly optimistic view of the moral resources of individuals and groups. Niebuhr said the Social Gospelers didn't see that society is in a perpetual state of war, and that justice in a sinful world demands a respect for power. Others like Richard Niebuhr also criticized Rauschenbusch for equating justice with a particular social movement, like socialism or communism.

Conclusions

Even with its short-comings, the Social Gospel never died. It lives on in individuals who look beyond themselves to the needs of the larger humanity. The Social Gospel lives in people who reach out to help those with AIDS, or visit people in prison, not to convert them to Christianity, or Islam, but to see the good in every person. The Social Gospel lives in people who stay all night outside a prison where an individual who has taken an innocent person's life is now being killed by the state. The Social Gospel is still alive when groups of people band together like IMPACT to help the homeless, work for a fair minimum wage, lobby for translators in the criminal justice system, or to guarantee medical and dental coverage, for all people. The Social Gospel lives in those individuals who want all people to have the opportunity to have an education, to be free of violence, to have a place to live and food on their table.

Walter Rauschenbusch continues to be an inspiration to those who stay the course applying their religion to the world around them. He quoted the words of James Russell Lowell in one of his books. Those words now can be applied to him:

To the tough hearts that pioneer their kind
And break a pathway to those unknown realms
That in the earth's broad shadow lie enthralled;
Endurance is the crowning quality,
And patience all the passion of great hearts;
...
The inspired soul but flings his patience in,
And slowly that outweighs the ponderous globe,--
One faith against a whole earth's unbelief,
One soul against the flesh of all mankind."

Let us never forget the Social Gospelers who preached this patience, this endurance to fight the good fight, to oppose all the evils we see, to never forget the poor, the needy, the prisoners, the widows, the sick. If we forget them we may be forgetting ourselves. We are one with all of human kind. So may it be.