

# The Social Gospel in 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> Century

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## I. Introduction: The Beginning of the Social Gospel

The Social Gospel is a modern movement involving clergy and laity that became apparent during the time when the 19<sup>th</sup> century turned into the 20<sup>th</sup>. Perhaps, the best definition of this movement is given by its prime theologian, Walter Rauschenbush (1861-1918). The pastor of the Second German Baptist Church located in the Hell's Kitchen district of New York city described the Social Gospel in these words:

When a minister speaks to his people about child labor or the exploitation of the lowly by the strong; when he insists on adequate food, education, recreation, and a really human opportunity for all, *there is a response*. [Emphasis added]. People are moved by plain human feeling and by the instinctive convictions which they have learned from Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Alternately defined, the Social Gospel in the United States was the religious wing of the Progressive Movement, which as a political force, sought to reduce injustice, suffering and poverty in society. The Social Gospel gained many adherents in Canada and led many Canadian ministers and their churches to become actively involved in social reform. The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation and the New Democratic Party are the political embodiments of the Social Gospel in Canada. Today, while becoming less identifiable in the United States<sup>2</sup>, the Social Gospel remains strong in the United Church

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, A Theology of the Social Gospel, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, pp7-8. This book is the best known work of this tireless social reformer and is based on his 1917 Taylor Lectures given at Yale University during the last years of his life.

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the Progressive Movement in the United States were absorbed into the New Deal Democrats which did much to vindicate Rauschenbush's vision during the period of the Great Depression.

and Anglican Church of Canada.<sup>3</sup> On a more vital and enduring note for the U.S. side, the work and writings of Martin Luther King on racial justice reflect a strong adherence to the theology of the Social Gospel, and the spirit of Rauschenbusch is merged with that of King and it remains alive and substantial.

## **II. Rauschenbusch and Marx**

Walter Rauschenbusch's theology was one of dynamic social change in the present, now and here; his flock is the poor and disenfranchised. Rauschenbusch was ready to challenge his fellow theologians in this way:

We have a social gospel. We need a systematic theology large enough to match it and vital enough to back it. ... If theology stops growing or is unable to adjust itself to its modern environment and to meet its present tasks, it will die. Many now regard it as dead. The social gospel needs a theology to make it effective; but theology needs the social gospel to vitalize it.<sup>4</sup>

Cursorily, one is tempted to associate Rauschenbusch with that other infamous theoretician of a new proletarian society, Karl Marx. Indeed, the Social Gospel also acquired a synonym, Christian Socialism, but the similarities quickly end. In fact, in Rauschenbusch's theology are found the true refutation of Marxism. When Marx denied God, Rauschenbusch declared:

Theology is not superior to the gospel. It exists to aid the preaching of salvation. Its business is to make the essential facts and principles of Christianity so simple and clear, so adequate and mighty, that all who preach or teach the gospel, both ministers and laymen, can draw on its stores and deliver an unclouded Christian image. When the progress of humanity creates ... new problems, such as social problems, theology must connect these with the old fundamentals of our faith and make them Christian tasks and problems.<sup>5</sup>

Even more bluntly in contradiction of Marx, Rauschenbusch proclaimed: "The social

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<sup>3</sup> Within Catholic Church, the Catholic Worker movement and Liberation Theology have similar parallels to protestant Social Gospel.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, A Theology of the Social Gospel, p1.

gospel is part of the return to Christ,”<sup>6</sup> and “[t]he social gospel is concerned about a progressive social incarnation of God.”<sup>7</sup> When Marx preached violent revolution and the eradication of the capitalist class, Rauschenbusch admonished:

It is a comfort to me to know that the changes required to make room for the social gospel are not destructive but constructive. They involve addition and not subtraction.<sup>8</sup>

When Marx envisioned, indeed demanded a dictatorship of the proletariat in the new society, Rauschenbusch saw that

To-day, it is the social gospel which has the democratic outlook and the sense of solidarity. If it also has spiritual fervor, it will have prophetic power.<sup>9</sup> ... The rise of free religion and political democracy has given him [the prophet] a field and a task. The era of prophetic and democratic Christianity has begun.<sup>10</sup>

Even so, Rauschenbusch denounced exploitative capitalism as the Kingdom of Evil,<sup>11</sup> and he saw the selfish, unbridled drive of capitalism as sin not only against God but also against other human beings. Further, he declared that “[a] State which uses its terrible power of coercion to smite and crush offenders as a protection of the rest [those who hold political power], is still under brutal law.”<sup>12</sup> When writing in 1917 and when his eyes were turned towards Russia, he saw Leo Tolstoi instead of Vladimir I. Lenin. Of Tolstoi,

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<sup>5</sup> *Id.*, pp6-7.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*, p56.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*, p148.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*, p11.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*, p196.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*, p279.

<sup>11</sup> See, Chapter IX, The Kingdom of Evil, *id.*, pp 77-94.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* p113. Interestingly, he continued: “A State which uses its superior power to overrun a weaker neighbor by force or wrest a valuable right of way from it by instigating a *coup d’etat*, or uses intimidation to secure mining or railway concessions or to force a loan at usurious rates on a half –civilized State is mortal sin. *Id.*”

he wrote:

<sup>13</sup>If Tolstoi, for instance, had never begun to follow Christ, he would be simply one of a group of brilliant Russian novelists. Since he received something of the mind of Jesus into his mind, he became one of the prophetic figures of our age and no one can tell how much he contributed, through others, to enable Russia, newly free to make one sincere and penetrating utterance made on behalf of democracy and peace in the Spring and summer of 1917.

On his vision of democracy and free religion in Russia, he was not wrong but his prophetic vision was over 70 years too early.

The other topic that distinguishes Rauschenbusch is his sighting of the Kingdom of God. When Rauschenbusch wrote that “[t]he Kingdom of God is not a concept nor an ideal merely, but a historical force,”<sup>14</sup> he may have come across as a radical left wing Hegelian enamored of dialectic materialism or even sound like a Marxist harping on the historical inevitability of the godless proletarian revolution, but that is to misunderstand Rauschenbusch. The real Rauschenbusch clearly is seen once more when he audaciously asserts:

This reformatory and democratizing influence of the social gospel is not against religion but for it. The worst thing that could happen to God would be to remain an autocrat while the world is moving towards democracy. *He would be dethroned with the rest.* [Emphasis added].<sup>15</sup>

But here we see the radical face of Rauschenbusch. He is critical of the *status quo*, and of both the Government and the Church as being overly aligned with the oppressive capitalists. Respecting the Church, he is critical:

If men do not expect to be regenerated, few will have the experience. If they do

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<sup>13</sup> *Id.*, pp164-65.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*, p165.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*, p178.

not expect to be inspired, few will make their way single-handed to such an experience. The Church has reversed all the maxims of Paul except the last. It has quenched the spirit; it has discontinued prophesying; it has forbidden intellectual scrutiny of inspiration so far as the biblical books were concerned. The only good thing it encouraged was to cleave to that which is good.<sup>16</sup>

To Rauschenbusch, the Church certainly is one part of the Kingdom of God, but the Kingdom of God is more than the Church:

The Kingdom of God is not confined within the limits of the Church and its activities. It embraces the whole of human life. It is the Christian transfiguration of the social order. The Church is one social institution alongside of the family, the industrial organization of society and the State. The Kingdom of God is in all these and realizes itself through them all.<sup>17</sup>

Akin to the many social activists of the 19th century, including on this point, Karl Marx, Rauschenbusch has no hesitation in appealing to what we now call the “grass-roots,” and what Marx call the “masses,” through which a new society may be realized. To Rauschenbusch, the Church is not on board insofar the mass line is concerned:

During the Middle Ages all society was ruled and guided by the Church. Few of us would want modern life to return to such a condition. Functions which the Church used to perform have outgrown its capacities. The Church is indispensable for the religious education of humanity and to the conservation of religion, but the greatest future awaits religion in the public life of humanity.<sup>18</sup>

In the footsteps of the Old Testament prophets, Rauschenbusch is bold to say of his contemporary understanding of God:

A theological God who has no interest in the conquest of [sic] justice and fraternity is not a Christian. It is not enough for theology to eliminate this or that autocratic trait. Its God must join in the social movement. The real God has been in it long ago.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Id.*, p192.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*, p145.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*, p178.

Rauschenbusch places his final and perhaps most radical hope in Jesus Christ:

Here we see on the highest redemptive services of Jesus to the human race. When he took God by the hand and called him "our Father," he democratized the conception of God. He disconnected the idea from the coercive and predatory State, and transferred it to the realm of family life, the chief social embodiment of solidarity and love. *He not only saved humanity; he saved God. He gave God his first chance of being loved and of escaping from the worst misunderstandings conceivable.*<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps, this is Rauschenbusch's most innovative contribution to modern systematic theology and our contemporary understanding of the nature of God:

The value of Christ's idea of the Fatherhood of God is realized only by contrast to the despotic ideas which it opposed and was meant to displace. We have classified theology as Greek and Latin, as Catholic and Protestant. It is time to classify it as despotic and democratic. *From a Christian point of view that is a more decisive distinction.*<sup>21</sup>

For good reason, some commentators and admirers tend to elevate Walter Rauschenbush to a prophet rather than view him as either a theologian or churchman. - there is evidence to support this viewpoint.

### **III. The Legacy of the Social Gospel**

It has been argued that Rauschenbusch died a disappointed man in the final days of World War I and succumbing of democratic socialism in Russia under the violence of the Soviets. An attack can even be mounted by pointing to the unrelenting series of catastrophes that included the Great Depression of the 1930s, World War II, the Marxist based tyranny of Joseph Stalin, the horrors of Nietzsche (right wing Hegelian) derived Hitlerism, and the race based Shoah of the Nazi Holocaust all combined to put an end to

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<sup>20</sup> *Id.*, p 174-75.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

the optimistic theology of liberalism and of the Social Gospel. Most devastating for Christian Socialists and liberal theologians who envisioned social justice, racial equality, and democracy were first the success of the Bolsheviks under Lenin and of Soviet military expansionism.

Was it irredeemable error to rely on the goodness of man towards his brother, as does theoretical socialism and liberal theology, when Genesis had cast man as utterly unable to resist sin and even as the jealous slayer of his brother?<sup>22</sup> In Christian theology, some rejoiced at the advent of American evangelical fundamentalism and apocalyptic prophesy which Rauschenbusch disdained and others took refuge in the realism of European neo-orthodoxy offered in the theology of Karl Barth and others. Hands-on American theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr while never discarding the quest for social justice, became more and more reluctant to associate Christianity with the cause of socialism and Karl Barth even argued that Niebuhr's revulsion against Marxism proved that the Christian cause was antithetical to liberal socialism.

Even so, the redemption of Rauschenbusch's vision within Christian theology has begun with the non-violent collapse of the Soviet Union and the bloodless liberation of all of the former Soviet satellite states.<sup>23</sup> As events in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have borne out, Rauschenbusch who marched at the front of the North American movement towards religion based socialism and whose liberal theology was grounded in the gospel of Christ and in the politics of democracy, has had the last word over the European branch of communistic socialism in the form of revolutionary Marxism which

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<sup>22</sup> Ironically, theoretical Marxism is also based on the assumption that socialistic man is inherently good

<sup>23</sup> With the demise of the Soviet Union and the military threat associated with it, there has arisen another source of confrontation, one that is on-going and in dire need to

denied the goodness and sovereignty of Christ. Communism based on the violent overthrow of one class over another and rule by merciless dictatorship has crumbled along with the more palpable fall of the Berlin wall. Rauschanbusch differed from Engels, Marx, Lenin and Stalin: these and other communists were less interested in finding God but more concerned with rifling for the perfect human system which must be implemented by armed revolution and maintained by brutal despotism. Rauschenbusch marching to the call of the Kingdom of God saw a just and fraternal human system implemented with God's love as revealed through Jesus Christ..

#### **IV. How the Topic Relates to my own Theology/Practice & Today's Church and Society in General**

During 1984-88 when I was employed by the United States Department of Labor as a Compliance Safety and Health Officer (inspector of the Occupational Safety & Health Administration - OSHA for short; from 1980-1984, I was with the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, US Public Health Service), I was able to observe, albeit a late 20<sup>th</sup> century version of the social tensions in industrial America. As an OSHA inspector, it was my job to enter workplaces around Cincinnati, Ohio to look for violations of Federal health and safety regulations. I focused on toxic chemicals in the workplace and technically I was certified as an industrial hygienist. Many of my inspections were made pursuant to complaints by workers and a smaller percentage were random. The unofficial motto of this watchdog agency was "OSHA Saves Lives." The inside joke was that to the employer being visited, OSHA stood for **O**, Shoot **H**ere **A**gain and for the employees of that workplace, OSHA stood for, perhaps somewhat irreverently and certainly self aggrandizingly, **O**ur **S**avior **H**as **A**rrived. Such were the gallows humor

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resolution – the violent clashes of the three monotheistic faiths.

of the inspectors, for occasionally, we had to inspect a workplace fatality, that is a case in which a worker was killed on the job. Fortunately for me, I did only on fatality during my service at OSHA - but there were over a dozen inspectors in our Area Office and we were familiar with each other's cases.

Therefore, Walter Rauschenbusch's observations about the desperate condition although far worse at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century struck a familiar chord with my experiences. The underlying social tensions involving social justice and racial equality remain valid to this day. Even looking back now, I do miss the feeling associated with entering a potentially dangerous workplace with the purpose of making it safer for the working men and women there. During this time, I wrote and published two books on workplace safety and health.<sup>24</sup> The potential deadliness of hazards inherent in any industrial environment which could strike a worker unexpectedly exists in the workplace and perhaps the second OSHA acronym was appropriate as it reminded everyone the fragility and preciousness of life.

On a broader plane, the salient contribution of Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel to the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the message that social change and racial equality can be implemented in modern and post-modern societies through Christ's love. God because of Christ is now called upon as the loving Father of the great family of men and women. God is praised and worshipped out of love and not fear and God reciprocates commensurately. Rauschenbusch's far reaching vision that democracy, religion and social justice are all part of the Kingdom of God is vindicated by the end of the Cold War between the democracies and communism. Marx and his theory of destructive

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<sup>24</sup> The two books are (1) How to Manage Workplace Derived Hazards and Avoid Liability, Noyes Publications, 1987 and (2) OSHA Compliance And Management Handbook, Noyes Publications, 1993.

revolutionary social change and dictatorship by the proletariat were shown to be untenable. The moderating impact of the Social Gospel has permitted industrialized democracies to implement social change in an orderly and constructive manner. The hope provided by the Social Gospel has also allowed the Christian nations to oppose the Communist states with confidence of final victory and I would like to believe has also contributed to the bloodless demise of the Soviet Union. However, with the death of communism, a new force with equal potential for destruction has arisen from the ashes of a failed ideology and this is the resurgence of violent conflict among the three monotheistic traditions. Novel inter-traditional efforts of reconciliation and of ecumenism are urgently needed and imitating the prophetic words of Walter Rauschenbusch, we need a systematic theology large enough to match the efforts of interfaith ecumenism and vital enough to back up the efforts of interfaith reconciliation. Rather ominously, if theology stops growing or is unable to adjust itself to its modern environment and to meet its present tasks, it will die; many in the world may die with it.

## **V. Conclusion**

The key to the theology of Social Gospel is the emphasis on the works of Jesus Christ and the Lord's vision of the "Kingdom of God." Jesus understood the immediate needs of mortal man when he fed the hungry crowd of five thousand men, besides women and children, with five loaves of bread and two fish and still had twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.<sup>25</sup> This the Lord did over the strong advice of the disciples to send the crowd away so that they can buy their own food.<sup>26</sup> In drawing upon the works of Christ, Walter Rauschenbusch can be said to be a modern day minister of

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<sup>25</sup> Matthew 14:14-21.

<sup>26</sup> Matthew 14:15

Christ whose vision of the Kingdom of God relies upon the example manifested by the Lord over two thousand years prior. The Social Gospel provides a current roadmap and inspirational hope that the current interfaith conflicts can be overcome and humanity can move ever closer to the Kingdom of God.

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