

The Vision of the Good Society in the Social Gospel: What, Where, and When is the Kingdom of God?

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Article abstract

The Progressive years, from the 1890s to 1919, were the last period of American history during which the “national faith” was publicly proclaimed in the political arena. By the 1930s, politicians excused themselves from appearing on platforms with the ministers and the symbols of Christian faith. Protestant clergymen owed their lease on the attentions of the politicians and the voting public of those years to the intellectuals’ patience with the liberal preachers’ reinterpretation of the agenda of progress in terms of the imminent, posmillennial “Kingdom of God.” Meanwhile, the spectacular advance of premillennialism in the ranks of the laity embarrassed the clergy by exposing the gulf between the liberal-philosophic commitments of the learned leadership and the continued investments of the laity in a supernaturalist understanding of the Christian faith. The vehemence of the Social Gospelers’ denunciation of premillennialism is the best clue to their determination not to accept the reality that would henceforth govern the life of the churches: that Christian faith and doctrine no longer belonged in the general culture.

The Vision of the Good Society in the Social Gospel: What, Where, and When is the Kingdom of God?

PAUL MERKLEY

Résumé

The Progressive years, from the 1890s to 1919, were the last period of American history during which the "national faith" was publicly proclaimed in the political arena. By the 1930s, politicians excused themselves from appearing on platforms with the ministers and the symbols of Christian faith.

Protestant clergymen owed their lease on the attentions of the politicians and the voting public of those years to the intellectuals' patience with the liberal preachers' reinterpretation of the agenda of progress in terms of the imminent, postmillennial "Kingdom of God." Meanwhile, the spectacular advance of premillennialism in the ranks of the laity embarrassed the clergy by exposing the gulf between the liberal-philosophic commitments of the learned leadership and the continued investments of the laity in a supernaturalist understanding of the Christian faith. The vehemence of the Social Gospelers' denunciation of premillennialism is the best clue to their determination not to accept the reality that would henceforth govern the life of the churches: that Christian faith and doctrine no longer belonged in the general culture.

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La période du progressisme qui, dans l'histoire des États-Unis, s'étend des années 1890 à 1919, fut la dernière période pendant laquelle on a entendu parler de "religion nationale" dans l'arène politique. Dans les années 1930, les hommes politiques s'excusaient lorsqu'ils avaient à partager l'estrade avec des pasteurs, arborant les symboles de la foi chrétienne.

Le clergé protestant a perdu la faveur des hommes politiques et de l'électorat de cette période au profit des prêcheurs libéraux, à cause de l'attitude conciliante des intellectuels devant l'interprétation qu'offraient ces derniers des voies du progrès de l'humanité, allant vers un "Royaume de Dieu" imminent et postmillénariste.

Pendant ce temps, l'avance spectaculaire du prémillénarisme chez les laïques embarrassait le clergé, tant était clair qu'il existait un fossé entre le libéralisme de l'élite cultivée et l'attitude des laïques encore liés à une conception surnaturelle de la foi chrétienne.

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Que les Social Gospelers aient violemment dénoncé le prémillénarisme, c'est là le meilleur indice que l'on puisse voir de leur refus d'accepter une réalité qui allait régir la vie des Églises, à savoir que désormais, la foi et la culture chrétienne ne feraient plus partie de la culture générale.

The ideal of the Kingdom of God built the holy commonwealths of New England, provided the core of "social gospel", and is the cardinal ingredient in American secular idealism today.

Roland Bainton

We are ceasing to feel that we are aliens and pilgrims on this earth. We are rather planning definitely to shape and alter it so as to constitute it the permanent home of mankind.

G.B. Smith

Let us therefore go to him, outside the camp, bearing the stigma that he bore. For we have here no permanent home, but we are seekers after the city that is to come.¹

i

It is a good, though not in my mind an unmixed good, to see that the Social Gospel is today once more an appealing research field to younger students of American history. Social Gospel was a stirring of the minds and hearts of leading Protestant preachers and churchmen, leading to aggressive activity in the name of reform of the political and the economic system in the first two decades of this century — what is called the Progressive Era. The beginnings of this movement, roughly the 1880s, coincide with the first outbursts of complaint against the socioeconomic bias of the industrial system and the conventional wisdom that sustained it, proposed by academics like Richard Ely and lay theorists like Henry George and Edward Bellamy. It started turning political in the 1890s, at the same time that the movements of Henry George and Edward Bellamy turned political, taking on socialist or quasiosocialist coloration, spawning political-action clubs and splinter parties. Some of these eventually drew together, as those other pre-Progressive causes did, into the fasces which was the Populist party. It came front-and-centre in national political life when Progressivism took possession of the left wing as well as the respectable centre of the two national parties, in the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt, William Taft, and Woodrow Wilson. It lost its place in the public esteem, though not immediately its self-esteem, when the nation went to war — when the Progressive agenda was rolled up and put away. It spoke *heroically* to the left-fringe conscience of Protestant clergymen in the 1880s and 1890s, *proprietary* to the centre in the middle years of Progressivism (1900–16), *defiantly* thereafter to an aging and soon-passing remnant.

1. Bainton was quoted on the jacket appreciation of H.R. Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937, rep. New York, 1959); G.B. Smith, *Social Idealism and the Changing Theology*, cited in Willem A. Visser 'T Hooft, *The Background of the Social Gospel in America* (1928, rep. St. Louis, n.d.), 42; Hebrews 13:13.

The enduring appeal of the Social Gospel to the historian relates, I believe, to the perception that for the last time ever we are seeing the mind and the heart and the will of the whole nation acting in unity. There is an apparent complementarity of political rhetoric and public philosophy, undergirded by an appeal to one uniform set of answers to life's largest questions, the Christian faith. While even then not customarily brought into discussions in the arena of political debate nor figuring in the media of popular culture (novels, plays, movies, and magazines), Christian faith was still universally (or as near to universally as mattered) presumed to be at work providing the masses with the answers to the largest questions of meaning — religion's agreed province. It justified in all minds the concern of all for each and of each for all. This, it was said, made democracy the perfect model for government.

While it was not customary to rehearse the dogmatic content of Christian faith in public settings, there were still in those days occasions generally agreed to be appropriate for explicitly addressing the God of the Christian faith, the generally acknowledged source of national and cultural values. For the last time ever, the politicians of this age used the vocabulary of received Christian theology in the broad light of day. The leading clergymen of the mainstream Protestant denominations (to which the vast majority of the politicians still belonged) enjoyed "name-recognition" (as we would now say) in the highest category, which they shared only with the leaders of government and a few athletes — not yet with "entertainers," let alone "stars." All the leading politicians were required to appear on platforms with them, and they did so gladly, as the occasions were dignified ones: scholarly conferences and public-issue forums, as well as ceremonial occasions. No politician would think of excusing himself from such intermixing of "spiritual" and "political" concerns, as virtually all politicians *did* by the 1930s by appealing to an alleged duty to respect an alleged wall of separation.

There was, in Henry May's words, a "national faith" and, in the broad light of day, everybody owned it.² Indeed, "the most effective preachers of the national faith in this period . . . were not ministers but statesmen."³ Consider the case of Theodore Roosevelt, who stood before the Long Island Bible Society of his own community of Oyster Bay and declared, "If we read the Bible aright, we read a book which teaches us to go forth and do the work of the Lord. That work can be done only by the man who in the fullest sense of the word is a Christian."⁴

2. Henry F. May, *Ideas, Faiths and Feelings: Essays on American Intellectual and Religious History, 1952-1982* (New York, 1983), ch. 10: "The Religion of the Republic," 163-86. The "national religion" May defines as "progressive, patriotic Protestantism." Its hegemony "began about 1815 and ended exactly in 1919." *Ibid.*, 172.

3. *Ibid.*, 177.

4. Cited *ibid.*

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No one thought it out of place, neither below nor above the belt, to stand on public platforms and ask whether an opponent's policy was "in the will of God." This Theodore Roosevelt did, "applying eternal principles of right"⁵ to every current domestic and international issue. Some of Roosevelt's addresses and magazine articles of the period 1915-16 he collected in a book under the title, *Fear God and Take Your Own Part*. Here we read:

When we sit idly by while Belgium is being overwhelmed and rolling up our eyes prattle with unctuous self-righteousness about "the duty of neutrality", we show that we do not really fear God; on the contrary, we show an odious fear of the devil, and a mean readiness to serve him If this nation had feared God it would have stood up for the Belgians and the Armenians; if it had been able and willing to take its own part there would have been no murderous assault on the *Lusitania*, no outrages on our men and women in Mexico [T]he professional pacifists in [meaning William Jennings Bryan] and out of office who at peace conferences pass silly resolutions which cannot be, and ought not to be, lived up to, and enter into silly treaties which ought not to be, and cannot be, kept, are not serving God, but Baal.⁶

Typically, the politicians took for granted that sound (that is, Progressive) *politics* stood upon sound (that is, progressive) *theology*. When an adversary went awry, it was because his theology was awry; in such dangerous cases it was necessary to bring this to light. Thus, an editorial from the *Outlook*, a journal edited by Lyman Abbott and Theodore Roosevelt, puts the presidential contest between Woodrow Wilson and Roosevelt himself into theological context:

The Democratic Party appeals to those who are dissatisfied with present conditions and desire to return to the conditions of a previous age. They look to the past for their ideal; they wish to return to the simplicity of the fathers. They are men who in their theology go back for their beliefs to the creeds of the sixteenth century, or even further to those of the fourth, and regard all new doctrines as heresies.

In politics men of this temperament desire to make the principles and policies of the fathers of 1787 the standard for their children of 1912 We look forward, not backward, to the Golden Age. We believe in a new theology, a new science, a new sociology, a new politics. We believe that in every day walks a better tomorrow; the world is steadily growing better, though with lapses, failures and retrogressions. We believe . . . that the twentieth century is as competent to make its theological creed as was the sixteenth or fourth.⁷

5. Theodore Roosevelt, *Fear God and Take Your Own Part* (New York, 1916), from the "introductory note," ix.

6. *Ibid.*, 17, 21, 22.

7. Cited in C. Gregg Singer, *A Theological Interpretation of American History* (Philadelphia, 1961; rev. ed. 1981), 167-68.

Admittedly, as Henry May says, Theodore Roosevelt was "a man of no great personal piety."⁸ Indeed, it should be put more strongly: the fact seems to be that he had substantial difficulty with the claims of the creed and energetically avoided them. But it is also true (and I suspect that May would agree about this) that there was no cynicism in Roosevelt's words just quoted. It is precisely because Roosevelt cannot be comfortably identified with explicit Christian faith that his example serves my present point better than that of William Jennings Bryan⁹ or Woodrow Wilson.¹⁰

In that age of confidence, much was taken for granted. The best people took for granted that the most worthy parts of religion had *evolved*, like everything else. Daniel Dorchester wrote in 1880 of the paradox, that it was now possible to miss the dominating role of Christianity in American life precisely

because Christianity has largely transformed Christendom morally, intellectually and socially: and therefore it [Christianity] does not look so bright on the new background as the old Peity has come out of the cloisters and gone forth among the masses, in imitation of "Him who went about doing good." No previous age can parallel in magnitude, in grandeur, in intelligent apprehension, the religious activities of this age.¹¹

In terms of William James's classic taxonomy of religious experience, the "national religion" was distinctly of the "once-born" type. A short sampler of Social Gospel expressions on the theme of the promise of the present and the immediate future must serve to make this, fairly basic, point:

Humanity is waiting for a revolutionary Christianity which will call the old world evil and change it. . . . The essential purpose of Christianity was to transform human society into the Kingdom of God. . . . The largest and hardest part of the work of Christianizing the social order has been done.¹²

Walter Rauschenbusch, 1907 and 1913

. . . anything short of a redeemed humanity — of a human society Christianized through and through — is unworthy to be the aim of Christian effort.¹³

Arthur C. McGiffert, 1915

It is the function of the Christian church to establish the Kingdom of God here and now on this earth, not to save men, few or many, from a world given over and abandoned as a wreck and lost, but to save the world itself by transforming it, translating it, transfusing it with new life.¹⁴

Lyman Abbott, 1915

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8. May, *Ideas*, 177.
 9. See especially W.H. Smith, "William Jennings Bryan and the Social Gospel," *Journal of American History* 53 (June 1966): 41-60.
 10. See especially Arthur S. Link, "Woodrow Wilson: Presbyterian in Government," in George L. Hunt, ed., *Calvinism and the Political Order* (Philadelphia, 1965), 157-74.
 11. Daniel Dorchester, *Christianity in the United States* (1888), cited in May, *Ideas*, 175.
 12. Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907, rep. ed. with intro. by Robert Cross, New York, 1964), 91 and xxiii; Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York, 1913), 124.
 13. Arthur C. McGiffert, *The Rise of Modern Religious Ideas* (New York, 1915), 279.
 14. Lyman Abbott, *Reminiscences* (1915), cited in Visser 'T Hooft, *Background*, 44.

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The most thorough and unblushing example I have found among the works of the front-rank Social Gospellers of this once-born confidence in the American man of the twentieth century is an address delivered by Washington Gladden before the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, at Minneapolis on 13 October 1909. It is worth quoting at some length:

It was through the nation that [according to the Old Testament prophets] the kingdom of God was to be set up in the world. The contact of the holy nation, the socialized nation, with other nations was to result in the transformation of the other nations into the same type of national life, with righteousness reigning and plenty and peace prevailing. All these glowing promises made by the old prophets, of the triumphs yet to be won for the Kingdom of God in the world, are made to the nation and not to the church You may say that the nation was conceived as a theocracy, and that is true, but that is God's plan for every nation; he desires no other relation to any nation than that which he maintained toward Israel

While, therefore, we acknowledge with humiliation that our nation still falls far below our ideal of a Christian nation, and while we are resolved by the grace of God to bring it a great deal nearer to that standard before this century is very old, yet even now, just as it is, we are not ashamed to put its civilization side by side with any civilization that is not Christian and let the world judge between them¹⁵

Here, Gladden offers a short list of recent US initiatives in foreign policy: the Open Door policy in China and the return of the Boxer indemnity, the recent diplomacy (the Root-Takahiri exchange) with Japan, and the US part in deliberations for peace within the Hague tribunal.

Ask Japan what evidence she has had within the last year [1908] that this nation means to deal with other nations on Christian principles, and whether Christian principles, thus incarnate in the life of a nation, do not commend themselves to her as sound principles of national life. [The question, of course, would be rhetorical!] Ask the whole world who it was that laid a strong but gentle hand upon Russia and Japan when they were devouring each other, and brought them into honorable peace. It was our President, you say, and he was acting on his own responsibility. Yes, but he never more perfectly represented the spirit of the nation than in that unofficial act, and all the world knows it. And all the world knows that the spirit of the nation as revealed in that act was the Christian spirit, and all the world stood still, reverently beholding a great nation going forth to claim the blessing of the peace makers.

May we not say that the world has seen in the years just past such a manifestation of the glory of Christianity as it never before has witnessed, in these acts by which, on a national scale, the spirit of Christianity has been exemplified? There have been great preachers of the gospel, great missionaries of the cross, but few, I believe, who have presented the principles of our religion to the non-Christian world more convincingly than William McKinley and John Hay and John W. Foster and Theodore Roosevelt and Elihu Root and William H. Taft.¹⁶

15. Washington Gladden, *The Nation and the Kingdom: Annual Sermon Before the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions* (1909), reprinted in *The Social Gospel in America: Gladden, Ely, Rauschenbusch*, ed. Robert T. Handy (New York, 1966), 141, 144.

16. *Ibid.*, 146.

It could not have occurred to a mind capable of the words just cited that there might be in the world a "twice-born" type of religious, or for that matter of any other, experience.

ii

Typically, academic historians have tended to denigrate the significance of the religious impulse in telling the story of the American people. When they do take note of its active presence, they prefer to portray it as a baneful influence.¹⁷ Only rarely in academic literature do we find religion's possibilities as a political force portrayed enthusiastically, as in these lines from Louis Koenig's biography of Bryan:

The portrayal of Bryan that is cemented in the stage drama and motion picture [*Inherit the Wind*, by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee] is the gross distortion that Darrow contrived at Dayton. It is that of a bigoted, ill-informed, hopelessly outdated old man. Darrow and the dramatists who have taken their cues from him have cheated posterity of knowledge of the whole man, of the better man, the resolute champion of social justice who for decades prior to the Monkey trial made religion and the Bible the foundation of an earthly kingdom of social justice and brotherhood among men and nations which today and as far into the future as the mind can see deserves the best efforts of men of goodwill.¹⁸

As Darrow's distortion of the mentality of Bryan and his cause has "cheated posterity of the knowledge of the whole man [Bryan]," so has the secularizing zeal of the textbook writers cheated posterity of knowledge of the whole presence of religious motive in the political life of the American nation.

Christian historians do not, therefore, gladly give up on the appearance of a national life informed by Christian conscience, of political leaders directly reminding each other of the will of God, referring each other to theologians for the correcting of their false politics. To the Christian historian it is cheering to think that the Social Gospel vision of, in Koenig's words, "the foundation of an earthly kingdom of social justice and brotherhood among men and nations" continues to exercise some honest appeal to secular historians. We are buoyed by the judgement, for example, of Richard Hofstadter that, "In the Progressive protest, the voice of the Christian conscience was heard more clearly than at any time since the days of the abolitionist movement."¹⁹ Rather, we *would*

17. This theme is elaborated, with the authority of the very best of the intellectual historians and with an irenic spirit that always fails me on this issue, by Henry May, *Ideas*, ch. 4, "The Recovery of American Religious History," ch. 8, "Intellectual History and Religious History," and ch. 9, "The Religion of the Republic." A particularly virulent expression of secularist animus on this theme is found in Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History* (Boston, 1986).

18. Louis W. Koenig, *Bryan: A Political Biography of William Jennings Bryan* (New York, 1971), 656.

19. Richard Hofstadter, ed., *The Progressive Movement 1900-1915* (Englewood Cliffs, 1963), from the introductory essay, "The Meaning of the Progressive Movement," 8.

be so buoyed, if we did not know that Hofstadter regarded this as the death spasm of enlightened Christian politics, the moment immediately before the time when popular anti-intellectualism drove learning and culture from the house of Christian belief forever.²⁰ We would prefer to see in the Progressive chapter a record that vindicates the enduring possibilities of Christian politics, those of which Koenig speaks. Yet we flinch, if anything more instinctively than Richard Hofstadter would do, when we read that the foreign policy actions of Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft are embodiments of the spirit of Christianity, on a level higher than anything the world has ever witnessed! Christians share with the most thoroughly secular historians the appreciation that these aberrant judgements are the price of identifying the will of God with the politics of men.

How then can a Christian historian vindicate his convictions about the possibilities for good which follow from the application of Christian faith in the realm of politics, without falling for the Social Gospelers' own estimation of the state of grace of themselves, their nation, and their times?

iii

Social Gospel, as I see it, makes no sense if divorced from its claim that American national purpose and the purpose for which Christianity came into the world now occupied the same ground. In Dorchester's version, national purpose had in fact become so thoroughly informed by true Christianity that one could no longer distinguish Christianity from the background of secular purpose. We miss the message of Social Gospel if we discount these words. It was not a mere manner of speaking.

This claim of the Social Gospelers I believe to be false. Indeed, is there anyone alive today who believes it to be true? Even so, when we say that it is false, there are at least two distinct things that we may be saying, two distinct claims that we may be denying. We may on the one hand be saying that the Social Gospelers *falsely described reality*: people who said these things did not correctly size up the world in which they were living. Alternatively, we may be saying that they *used words falsely*. In the first case they were using words whose meanings were agreed, but applying them incorrectly to the real world; the world was not as they described it. In the second case, they were using words in ways that were false to their real meanings.

Nobody I know of seems prepared to defend the Social Gospelers from complaints of the first kind. Complaints of the second kind bring us necessarily into the jurisdiction of theology, where, for the most part, we remain for the remainder of this essay.

This is a jurisdiction that many are loath to enter. A man can be an atheist and none the less enter it with enthusiasm because he is a scholar. Such was the case with

20. This is the argument of chapters 3 through 5 of Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York, 1963).

Perry Miller, who was drawn to the study of Puritanism, he tells us²¹, because it was the Puritan generation that founded the intellectual tradition of the United States. Miller measured out the days of his scholarly life in the reading of sermons and other pious literature whose arguments, he was convinced, were about nothing at all real, but which had to be mastered for the sake of a correct historical understanding of the period. For this he is rightly honoured. Yet is Miller's example appropriate to the question of the study of Social Gospel? Is it necessary, or even germane, to an appreciation of the mind of Progressivism, its scholarship, or its highbrow, middlebrow or low-brow culture, to master (as Miller had to do) all the key concepts of dogmatic theology, the history of their applications in learned and popular debate, and the names of the divisions and subdivisions of the parties on all the doctrinal points? Surely we need only to *ask* the question. Does anyone seriously believe that Theodore Roosevelt, for all his talk of being a real Christian and of doing the will of God and not doing the will of the devil (nor of Baal!), spent even the tiniest amount of his legendary energies in the reading of systematic theologies, church histories, Biblical commentaries, or any branch or subbranch of pious literature? Did he even pretend to? Did anybody expect him to? The answer to all the above questions is, quite clearly, no.

In *The End of American Innocence: a Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912-1917*, Henry May documents the ineffable blindness of "the custodians of the culture" in the Progressive years:

With a certain insistence that raises doubts about their real confidence, most of the custodians of culture prophesied that America would prove able to deal with the immigrant flood, the vulgar plutocracy, the rising materialism of the middle class, the attacks on sound education, and the many incomprehensible vagaries of the youngest generation. Within democracy but under the leadership of its proper guardians, idealism would be strengthened and culture spread through the land. Naturally such a victory would demand the strenuous effort which was a central ingredient — perhaps the most surely surviving ingredient — of the Puritan heritage.

When we encounter this bland vision in the year of beginning cultural upheaval [he has just cited an editorial condemning the new "naturalism" and "decadent" poetry, in the *Independent*, February 1912], when we remember that every article of the standard creed was being sharply attacked, when we remember that young men had long been reading Marx and Nietzsche, that Veblen and Shaw and Mencken had loosed their arrows, we have a sense of double vision. To explain the complacency of the still dominant custodians of culture, we must look at their power in strategic terms In 1912,

21. "What I believe caught my imagination . . . was a realization of the uniqueness of the American experience I could see no way of coping with the problem except by going to the beginning [W]hat seized upon me and still directs me is the inner logic of the research. Certainly not — in any sense — a personal predilection. The beginning I sought was inevitably — being located in the seventeenth century — theological Since the first articulate body of expression upon which I could get a leverage happened to be a body of Protestant doctrine, I set myself to explore that doctrine in its own terms." Perry Miller, *Errand Into the Wilderness* (New York, 1956), ix.

the champions of moralism, of progress, and culture still retained a hold on nearly all the strategic centers of cultural war, on the universities, the publishing houses, the weightier magazines, and most of the other centers of serious opinion. This led to something like a Maginot psychology; those centers were to prove less solid than they looked.²²

May's primary reference here is to "the genteel tradition" in literary and artistic culture. "Respectable" writers and artists, he makes clear throughout, are to be understood as the residual heirs to the tradition whose themes, preoccupations, and values trace to Puritan culture, the culture of the keepers of the vision of the biblical commonwealth.²³ All the more poignant, then, is the case of preachers, those custodians of the treasury of theology, than that of literary people. How much more responsibility do they bear for the "Maginot psychology" of the last hours of the Progressive Age!

It would be difficult to improve on Henry May's two-paragraph synopsis of the Social Gospel:

In 1912 the characteristic American religion of the articulate and up-to-date middle class was the Social Gospel. In this view God's method included not only biological evolution but economic and political progress. According to Lyman Abbott, the aged but

22. Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912-1917* (1959, rep. ed. Chicago, 1964), 51.

23. A valuable but neglected source of insights on the civilization of "the beginning" (as Miller puts it) is Joseph Gaer and Ben Siegel, *The Puritan Heritage: America's Roots in the Bible* (New York, 1964). Intended (as the authors state on page v) as an introduction "for the general reader" to the matter of "America's indebtedness — in certain aspects of its culture — to the Judaeo-Christian beliefs, customs, and writings," it argues that Shaping the new civilization from the start and influencing its growth was the religious heritage the settlers transplanted to its soil. This religion was principally Christianity, and from the beginning it was Bible-directed. Its adherents — in New England especially — attempted to create in the new land a Bible commonwealth that would fulfill God's plan for man.

The religious, political, and economic factors motivating these first New Englanders were varied and often contradictory. Yet the settlers' prime goal was always a society more perfect than the one from which they had come. Always the Bible was the majority's unchallenged authority. Biblical and post-biblical injunctions guided the evolving relationship of church and state. Bible precedents led to an equitable judiciary and to an elaborate system of public-supported schools and colleges. Biblical, talmudic, and early Christian practices gave sanction to enlightened medical and sanitation procedures. Biblical imagery, language, and style inspired much of the new nation's literature The philosophic patterns of the Puritans . . . are rooted in the images, principles, and laws of the Bible. America's roots lie deep in Biblical soil, planted there from the country's very beginnings. (ix-x, 13)

It would of course follow from these premises that a historical appreciation of any aspect of the life of that founding time would be open only to persons thoroughly familiar with biblical theology and "Biblical, talmudic, and early Christian practices." Hence, Miller's readiness "to explore that doctrine in its own terms."

powerful editor of the *Outlook*, who had been through the long battles over evolution and the Social Gospel in his youth, the Divine methods included law, commerce, and education.

In its extreme form, the Social Gospel taught that evolution under Divine guidance would eventuate in the coming of Christ's kingdom. This phrase did not connote anything apocalyptic or miraculous. The true work of Christ had been misstated and obscured; it consisted of providing humanity with a method and example of its own progressive salvation. This salvation, in America, was well under way. On June 29, 1912, *Collier's*, starting a series of articles on prominent ministers, quoted the aged Washington Gladden, himself once a lonely battler for progressive Christianity and now "the First Citizen of Columbus," in a prayer delivered in his church on a recent Sunday:

Lord, we believe Thou art as near to us as Thou hast ever been to any people in any age.

... Trials and tribulations could be borne as long as it was believable that mankind was basically improving. If this belief were ever shaken — an event almost unthinkable in [the Progressive Era] . . . religion would be shaken with it.²⁴

We must not be deceived by the Social Gospelers' own image of themselves. Social Gospelers behaved as though they spoke for the conscience of the nation, from a position like that of the Puritan clergy. They made the kind of noises that they understood that Christian clergymen ought to be making on public platforms in a Christian land. America was, however, no longer a "biblical commonwealth." More to the point: not even the clergy were claiming that their prescriptions for the good society derived from the Bible. Far from it. James M. Whiton, the editor of an influential series of "works on Modern Theology," reasonably summed up the situation with respect to the authority of the Bible and of dogmatic theology in the principal seats of Christian learning in the Progressive Age, in his "editorial note" introducing Arthur C. McGiffert's *The Rise of Modern Religious Ideas*: "That the systematic theology framed by 'the old divines' has hopelessly broken down in the collapse of the ancient conceptions of God, of Nature, of the Bible, and of man, which molded and sustained it, is now frankly confessed in the chief seats of theological instruction."²⁵

24. May, *End*, 12-14.

25. Arthur C. McGiffert, *The Rise of Modern Religious Ideas* (New York, 1915), vii. McGiffert's own estimation of the authority of the Bible is precisely in the vein indicated by the editor. It was, furthermore, exceedingly influential in his time, as McGiffert was possibly the most generally esteemed historian of Christian thought in his generation. His views are developed in the context of a history of the emancipation of religious ideas from the grip of dogmatics, very obviously and confessedly indebted to Schleiermacher, Strauss, and Ritschl. Since Luther, McGiffert argues, religion has been imposed as authoritatively as it had been in medieval times, the difference being that "the new authority" is now the Bible.

The new authority was just as external as the old, and submission to it just as slavish. . . . The principle of authority was as medieval in historic Protestantism as in Catholicism, and it was only lack of historical imagination which for so long prevented Protestants from realizing the fact. . . . Theoretically, indeed, the

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The point cannot be made too strongly: in claiming the title of a Christian nation for the United States — as, for illustration, Gladden does in the message to the conference on missions, quoted a few paragraphs back — the clergy were not claiming that Americans could *or that they should* address the Bible or historic dogmas as a source for their prescriptions for the rule of public life. This, of course, was precisely what the Puritans did demand. The essence of the Social Gospellers' claim was, rather, that their message fully conformed to the most advanced thought of their time. "[We see God] revealing himself to us in all [the world's] laws and forces, and therefore all ordered knowledge of the world must be bringing him nearer to our thought, and every science tributary to that great unifying revelation wherein faith and knowledge are no longer twain but one."²⁶

"All the different threads of analysis of social gospel thought," concluded W.A. Visser 'T Hooft,

lead to this ultimate conception: the emphasis on the immediate task in the present world, the valuation of life for its own sake, the secularization of the Kingdom idea, the interpretation of Jesus' teachings as principles for a better but not essentially different social order, the belief in gradual evolution and the optimistic view of the possibilities of human nature — all those traits which characterize the social gospel — are ultimately rooted in this fundamental idea of the unity of reality.²⁷

Social Gospel self-confidence was based on a totally false impression that the mind and the heart of the nation were Christian. Compounding the possibilities of "false

Protestant conception of authority was even more mechanical and inelastic than the Catholic, for the latter, at least had a living court of appeal which might conceivably take account of the new revelation and the growing wisdom of the ages, while the former had a finished revelation and a closed canon which could never be subtracted from or added to until the end of time. Fortunately for themselves Protestants have commonly been better than their own principles, and have so re-read the Bible in successive centuries as to make it practically a new book and thus adapt it to the needs of one age after another. Had the various Protestant sects not seen fit to record their interpretation of Biblical truths in creedal forms, and to make the acceptance of these forms binding upon their adherents, the process of reinterpretation and readaptation might have gone on more freely and with much less friction than it had. . . . [T]here can be little question that the Protestant doctrine of an infallible and self-interpreting Bible is bound to disappear from the minds of men long before the Catholic doctrine of an infallible Church. (283-85.)

Identical views, developed for presentation to a wider lay audience, are to be found in Washington Gladden, *Who Wrote the Bible? A Book for the People* (1891), portions of which are excerpted in Handy, ed., *The Social Gospel in America*, 84-101.

26. Washington Gladden, *How Much is Left of the Old Doctrines?* (1899), cited *ibid.*, 26-27.
27. Visser 'T Hooft, *Background*, 161. Walter Horton makes the same point: "Strong in the faith that all truth and all value belonged to a single harmonious system, of which the religious insights of the Bible and the guiding conceptions of modern science and philosophy were mutually consistent parts, liberal theologians were convinced that the great task of Christian thought was of restating Christian Gospel in terms acceptable to the modern mind." Walter M. Horton, "Realistic Theology" in his *Theology in Transition* (New York, 1931).

consciousness" (as the Marxists say) that would follow from that error were those that follow from the other equally false and "fundamental idea" that the message of the gospel and the message of secular wisdom of the nineteenth century were complementary aspects of "a unity of reality."

There is no Perry Miller of the Social Gospel, no atheist historian who has immersed himself in the doctrine, dogmas, and the inside history of the church in order to explicate the age of the Social Gospel. There is no Perry Miller of the Social Gospel, and no place to put one if we had one. There is a "Puritan Age" and a "Puritan Culture," and of course a "Puritan Mind." There is no "Social Gospel Age", no "Social Gospel Culture," no "Social Gospel Mind." The Social Gospel was an interesting phenomenon belonging to the Progressive Age, whose culture and mind were already post-Christian. The Social Gospel was a fashion in preaching and public exhortation that took hold for a time while the company of American politicians was seeking to recruit among the Protestant preachers, and the Protestant preachers were seeking to recruit within the company of the politicians.²⁸ The interest of the politicians was to persuade the preachers to attach the language of the sacred tradition to specific political actions — their own, of course. The interest of the preachers was to persuade the politicians to attach themselves as individuals to the traditional rhetoric of evangelical revival so that the laity could see the integrity of the Progressive programme with the plan of redemption. The relationship between the two camps was utterly false.

It was, of course, no part of the responsibility of the politicians to vouch for the integrity of their own use of the words which the preachers proffered them out of the treasury of theology. At the same time, the preachers clearly felt little responsibility for bringing the politicians' use of words into conformity with their historic meanings within the church. Indeed, had the will existed on their part to impose such conformity, the means clearly did not. Not a vestige remained of the Puritan clergy's power to require conformity to the church's standards regarding the use of its own vocabulary.²⁹

Long before 1900, American culture had become post-Christian. Sidney Mead argues that, already by as early as about 1800, "Americans have in effect been given the hard choice between being intelligent according to the standards prevailing in their intellectual centers, and being religious according to the standards prevailing in their

28. F.M. Szasz makes an impressive case that "evangelical Christian rhetoric was indispensable to the cohesion and drive of the Progressive movement. . . . [T]he Progressive years found the clergy at the height of their power. They were an important moral force in their communities. They were listened to on all subjects. . . . They created an atmosphere that made many reforms possible." Ferenc Morton Szasz, *The Divided Mind of Protestant America, 1880-1930* (Birmingham, 1982), 66-67.

29. On this theme of the decline of the Protestant clergy's power to account, through teaching and discipline, for the churches' fidelity to their historic teachings, I recommend Franklin H. Littell, *From State Church to Pluralism: a Protestant Interpretation of Religion in American History* (New York, 1962).

intellectual centers, and being religious according to the standards prevailing in their denominations.”³⁰ The diagnosis is, in my view, brilliantly correct, though perhaps reached too early. Certainly the diagnosis fits the case by 1900. A recent book by James Turner³¹ argues persuasively that it was during the post-Civil War generation, and essentially as a consequence of the triumph of Darwinian evolutionary theory, that “unbelief became possible for the first time” in our culture; that is, that it came to be generally agreed among intellectuals that the existence of God was not a proposition necessary for positing principles of order and coherence in nature or for the vindication of moral behaviour. It is a remarkably well-argued book, and I take the liberty of quoting at length a few passages helpful to my present argument:

By the 1880’s unbelief had assumed its present status as a fully available option in American culture. . . . The new viability of unbelief did not mean (*pace* some vitriolic infidels) that belief had lived its allotted career in human evolution and was fast sinking into decrepitude. It was, to the contrary, flourishing in impudent good health. Church membership in the United States grew dramatically between 1860 and 1910, and nothing suggests any diminution of fervor among these multiplying believers. The point is not that unbelief had begun to drive out belief, but that unbelief had become one readily available answer to the question, What about God. . . . ?

Belief became then [by about 1900] for the first time, remains still, *subcultural* [emphasis in original]. To be sure, opinion surveys invariably show that most Americans believe in God — so the “believing” subculture includes most members of the whole culture. But belief no longer functions as a unifying and defining element of that entire culture; it no longer provides a common heritage of that entire culture; it no longer provides a common heritage that underlies our diverse world views. . . . [B]elieving in God [has become strictly] a matter of individual choice. . . . The option of godlessness has disintegrated our common intellectual life. . . .³²

Turner argues that our understanding of this chapter — the remarkably sudden defection of the intellectuals from Christian faith in the midnineteenth century — has been seriously flawed because historians of ideas have dwelt on the alleged irresistibility of the secular world view: “Though both science and social transformation loom large in the picture, neither caused unbelief. . . . On the contrary, religion caused unbelief.”³³ The leaders of Protestantism in the late nineteenth century, says Turner, made a conscious decision “to deal with modernity by embracing it — to defuse modern threats to the traditional bases of unbelief by bringing God into line with modernity.”³⁴

The hope of the Social Gospelers was bound up, as everyone knows, in their expectations regarding the Kingdom of God. Christians cannot speak of the good society

30. Sidney Mead, “Denominationalism: The Shape of Protestantism in America,” cited in Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism*, 119.

31. James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: the Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore, 1985).

32. *Ibid.*, 262–64.

33. *Ibid.*, xiii.

34. *Ibid.*, 266.

unless they speak first of the Kingdom of God. "The Kingdom," or "the Kingdom of God," or "the Kingdom of Heaven," is the form used by Christ to express the whole purpose, the final and inclusive purpose, of God for mankind and creation. A responsible doctrine of the Kingdom of God should come to focus in the study of what Jesus said. Nevertheless the Social Gospellers' attitude of sovereign liberty with respect to the authority of the Bible and the historic creeds precluded the possibility of a responsible doctrine of the kingdom. The kingdom was for Rauschenbusch, for Matthews, for Gladden, for Abbott — *for all of them* — a free-floating concept, capable of taking up any statement or programme from whatever source that speaks of an ideal relation of man to man or of man to nature. This can be tested simply. One need only substitute the phrase, "a better future," for the phrase, "Kingdom of God," in any statement taken from Rauschenbusch's corpus or that of his peers, his epigoni, or his emulators, and one will quickly see that in every case it "works" — that is, it captures, without the need for addition or subtraction, the whole thought of the original.

The Social Gospel preachers liked to picture themselves as Old Testament prophets — as, incidentally, do the Liberation theologians of today. They liked to quote, and to attach themselves to, the classical prophets' thunderings against the rich, the priests, incense, luxury, and fatted calves. They rightly linked Jesus to this tradition of prophetic protest against injustice and false worship. But theologically conservative theologians, it should be noted, could be as quick as theologically liberal ones to draw attention to a radical challenge to established order in the classical prophets and in Jesus: the willingness to acknowledge this was not the thing that separated the liberal theologians from the conservative theologians, even though Social Gospellers typically made this out to be the case. The Social Gospellers, unlike the conservatives, to a man (I know of no exception) refused to attach themselves to that part of the message of both Jesus and the prophets that spoke of the kingdom in apocalyptic terms — that is, as appearing suddenly, in God's time, to sweep away the present order of things in the cosmos, and to replace all with "new heavens and a new earth." Typically, Social Gospellers acclaimed the theory of evolution for delivering religion from its captivity to the superstitious belief in a Second Coming of Christ. "Translate," said Rauschenbusch, "the evolutionary theories into religious faith, and you have the doctrine of the Kingdom of God. This combination with scientific evolutionary thought has freed the kingdom ideal of its catastrophic setting and its background of demonism, and so adapted it to the climate of the modern world."³⁵ In this, too, they are at one with the Liberation theologians of today.

35. Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing*, 90. Charles Hopkins, in *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915* (New Haven, 1940) offers this sampler of typical Social Gospel thoughts on the Kingdom of God:

The Kingdom, said Lyman Abbott, will be brought by men on earth [his *The Ethical Teachings of Jesus*, 1910]; it will be "an ideal social order in which the relation of men to God is that of sons, and to each other that of brothers"; for Jesus it was neither materialistic nor supramundane, neither a political state nor an individual way of life.... [In Shailer Matthews, *The Social Teachings of Jesus*, 1897,] the apocalyptic character of the kingdom was rejected as a justifiable interpretation of Jesus' use of the phrase. Peabody claimed that Jesus did not share the eschatological ideas of his age; he must be understood "above the heads of

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Unlike the Liberation theologians, however, the Social Gospel theologians prided themselves on their irenic spirit. If anything, this quality makes them harder to bear in large doses than the Liberation theologians — their dogged, studied, and self-congratulatory “openness” to this, that, and every viewpoint and insight of science, philosophy, other religions, and radical political philosophies. On the reverse side, this irenism is a greedy assimilationism, a buoyant confidence that history was moving to a vindication of their own message, in the character of a general, universal disclosure that all well-disposed thinkers along all confident lines were consistently on the one great path to the one great truth, presently best expressed by themselves.

There is one outstanding exception to this generalization. There is one place, and one place only, where their irenic spirit fails them. This is on the matter of “eschatology” — what the creeds call plainly “the last things,” and popular religious literature then preferred to call End Times. If you put your ear up close to this shelf of genteel literature, and you hear somewhere inside an explosion going off — search further, and you will find that it is one of the rather few places where the Social Gospel preachers have stooped to notice and to deal with End Times.³⁶

Shirley Jackson Case of the University of Chicago published an article on “The Premillennial Menace” in *Biblical World*, then followed it up with a book, *The Millennial Hope: a Phase of Wartime Thinking*. Both appeared in 1918, and both were products of haste and spleen. Nothing in Social Gospel literature matches the meanness of spirit, the sheer McCarthyite dirtiness of Case’s thoughts on this theme:

The American nation is engaged in a gigantic effort to make the world safe for democracy. . . . Under ordinary circumstances one might excusably pass over premillenarianism as a wild and relatively harmless fancy. But in the present time of testing it would be almost traitorous negligence to ignore the detrimental character of the premillennial propaganda. By proclaiming that wars cannot be eliminated until Christ returns and that in the meantime the world must grow constantly worse, this type of teaching strikes at the very root of our present national endeavor to bring about a new day for humanity, when this old earth shall be made a better place in which to live, and a new democracy of nations shall arise to render wars impossible. . . . Premillennialists resent the suggestion that enemy gold is behind their activities, and one group of them has publicly affirmed that the federal authorities’ inspection of their books failed

his reporters.” [Endicott Peabody, *Jesus Christ and the Social Question*, 96.] . . . [When Jesus spoke of the Kingdom coming as a seed growing or leaven working,] Jesus meant evolution (although he could scarcely have been expected to use that word [sic!], and his use of biological analogies indicates that he presupposed an organic society. Such was the force of the “ruling ideas.”

36. For leads on this literature, see Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming* (enlarged ed., Grand Rapids, 1978), 65–81. The most developed of the Social Gospel theses against the present-day relevance of Biblical eschatology include Frances J. McConnell, “The Causes of Premillenarianism,” *Harvard Theological Review* XII (April 1919): 179–92, and Shirley Jackson Case, *The Millennial Hope: A Phase of Wartime Thinking* (Chicago, 1918). Rauschenbusch’s fullest treatment of it is in his *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917, rep. New York and Nashville, 1945), ch. 18: “Eschatology,” 208–39.

to justify this suspicion. However that may be, we have in the premillennial propaganda as a whole an instance of serious economic waste by which large sums of money are being diverted from projects that might contribute directly to the success of the war.³⁷

Social Gospelers, it should be carefully noted, insisted on separating the apocalyptic hope altogether from the message of the classical Old Testament prophets. They rested their defence for this upon the dodge accomplished by the Wellhausen form-critics: all talk of last things is banned to later centuries, long after the classical prophets are gone, when the well of true prophecy had run dry, and when the essentially desperate and escapist notion of ‘‘a new heaven and a new earth’’ has become the scene of the messianic kingdom.³⁸ Likewise, liberal historical scholarship on the New Testament,³⁹ following the lead of David F. Strauss (1808–74), had separated ‘‘the historical Jesus’’ from all words and sayings that appeared to endorse apocalyptic views; understanding Jesus ‘‘above the heads of his reporters’’ meant understanding that He either did not say the things the Gospels present Him as saying, or that He was winking at nineteenth century liberal scholars as He did. The problematics of textual criticism and historical questions were never rehearsed by the Social Gospel theologians. It was simply stated that these are ‘‘the commonplaces of scientific biblical study.’’⁴⁰ Take it or leave it.

An entirely unlooked-for complication for the world view of Protestant liberals arose contemporaneously with the appearance of the principal books of Social Gospel theology, when Albert Schweitzer proposed, in the very name of scientific-historical criticism, that Jesus’ own message was through-and-through ‘‘eschatological.’’ Indeed, Schweitzer argued, the passages of the Gospels most thoroughly eschatological in character were precisely those most surely to be assigned to Him! This proposal so enraged the usually benign Walter Rauschenbusch that he was moved to fend off this threat to settled liberal views with this piece of rather ignorant calumny:

My own conviction is that the professional theologians of Europe, who all belong by kinship and sympathy to the bourgeois classes and are constitutionally incapacitated for understanding any revolutionary ideas, past or present, have overemphasized the ascetic and eschatological elements in the teachings of Jesus. They have classed as ascetic or eschatological apocalyptic the radical sayings about property and non-resistance which

37. Case, ‘‘The Premillennial Menace,’’ *Biblical World* (July 1918), cited in *Eerdman’s Handbook to Christianity in America*, eds. Mark A. Noll et al (Grand Rapids, 1983), 373.

38. A magisterial summation of the Wellhausen thesis, together with a detailed survey of the literature built upon it and in opposition to it, is R.K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, 1969) esp. 1–82, 349–414, 415–91 and 741–821.

39. The classic survey of this is Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, 3rd ed. (London, 1954). For the impact of the arguments of Schweitzer (his first edition of the *Quest* was printed in 1906) and Wrede on the liberals, see W.R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge, 1976), 215f. For a learned review of the literature since, see the *Anchor Bible Matthew*, introduction, translation and notes by W.F. Albright and C.S. Mann (Garden City, 1971), xix-cxc.

40. McConnell, ‘‘The Causes of Premillennialism,’’ 180–81.

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seem to them impractical or visionary. If the present chastisement of God purges our intellects of capitalistic and upper-class iniquities we shall no longer damn these sayings of Jesus by calling them eschatological, but shall exhibit them as anticipations of the fraternal ethics of democracy and prophecies of common sense.⁴¹

Notice that Rauschenbusch makes no attempt to meet the learned thesis with a learned argument. He was, of course, out of his league in these technical-scholarly matters. Instead, he crushes a learned argument with political slogans — and puerile slogans at that. (Could there be anything sillier than the notion of Albert Schweitzer as the toady of capitalist bosses?) It is striking to compare this outburst to the consistently deferential posture that Rauschenbusch had assumed towards German “scientific-historical” scholarship, so long as it sustained the liberal image of the Christ of the social prophets.

What is behind these violent outbursts against any and all versions of the apocalyptic hope? Social Gospelers were painfully aware that questions about End Times were increasingly occupying their laity, and this deeply alarmed them.⁴² At root, their fear was that the church would lose its credibility in enlightened company. They rightly saw that their present prestige as spokesmen for the age was bound up with their promotion of a convergence of the kingdom-hope of Christian faith with the secular vision of progress towards the New Man. When presented with a clear choice between the alien world view of the Gospels (its “catastrophic setting,” its “background of demonism”) and the modern world view, Social Gospelers did not hesitate: “Today religious fancy must submit to the factual restraints of scientific sanity.”⁴³

The war caused a quick acceleration of the already alarming tendency towards premillennialism, letting loose for the world to see the nightmare-truth that the increasingly restless and truculent laity did not believe in the convergence of the Christian vision of the kingdom with the secular vision of progress. There was no squaring that circle. Social Gospel made no sense at all unless it spoke for the future of the church. Social Gospelers had won their place in the seats of learning and of politics by the appeal of their claim to be able to harness the best elements of the church to the realization of the Kingdom of God (“A Better Future”) on this earth. G.B. Smith summed up the case for all of them: “We are ceasing to feel that we are aliens and pilgrims on this earth. We are rather planning definitely to shape and alter it so as to constitute it the permanent home of mankind.” When it is put that starkly, the incompatibility of the Social Gospel’s doctrine of the kingdom with that of the creeds is abundantly clear. In once-born faith, there is no place for any Second Coming.

Social Gospel belongs to the first hours of the consignment of Christian belief to the subculture. The vehemence of the Social Gospelers’ denunciation of the millennialists

41. Rauschenbusch, *Theology*, 158

42. On this see Weber, *Living in the Shadow*; Szasz, *The Divided Mind*, 72 f.; and Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianisms, 1800-1930* (1970, rep. Grand Rapids, 1978).

43. Case, *Millennial Hope*, 233.

is the clue to their desperate determination not to accept the true, that is, the subcultural situation with regard to Christian faith and doctrine. Another way of putting this is to say that belief was now, in the original sense of the term, *proletarian*.

Social Gospel is an ideology for insiders, for the promotion of culture. Every jot and tittle of its creed speaks approvingly of the culture, the culture of the Progressive Age. Nothing in the Social Gospel is of any use in justifying the alien, or proletarian appearance which Christian faith must bear in its present subcultural situation.