

The Social Gospel in American Religion

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE

The Social Gospel in American Religion

A HISTORY

Christopher H. Evans



A remarkable history of the powerful and influential social gospel movement.

The global crises of child labor, alcoholism and poverty were all brought to our attention through the social gospel movement. Its impact on American society makes it one of the most influential developments in American religious history.

Christopher H. Evans traces the development of the social gospel in American Protestantism, and illustrates how the religious idealism of the movement also rose up within Judaism and Catholicism.

Contrary to the works of previous historians, Evans demonstrates how the presence of the social gospel continued in American culture long after its alleged demise following World War I. Evans reveals the many aspects of the social gospel and their influence on a range of social movements during the twentieth century, culminating with the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. It also explores the relationship between the liberal social gospel of the early twentieth century and later iterations of social reform in late twentieth century evangelicalism.

The Social Gospel in American Religion considers an impressive array of historical figures including Washington Gladden, Emil Hirsch, Frances Willard, Reverdy Ransom, Walter Rauschenbusch, Stephen Wise, John Ryan, Harry Emerson Fosdick, A.J. Muste, Georgia Harkness, and Benjamin Mays. It demonstrates how these figures contributed to the shape of the social gospel in America, while arguing that the movement's legacy lies in its profound influence on broader traditions of liberal-progressive political reform in American history.

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Introduction

SUMMARY

The introduction provides an overview of the social gospel's significance as a movement of religious idealism in American history. While associated with late nineteenth-century historical developments in American Protestantism, themes of the social gospel also had an impact on a range of movements in Catholicism and Judaism. The introduction identifies the social gospel's relationship to traditions of American evangelicalism and liberalism, while also emphasizing the movement's broader contributions to the rise of the political left in the twentieth century.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What major themes define the social gospel as a movement in American religious history?

ASSIGNMENT/CLASS EXERCISES

Have students conduct a web search on the term "the social gospel" and identify at least five examples of how the term is applied (this could include formal definitions or the ways that the term has been used in blogs, columns, editorials, etc.). What seem to be common themes in how the term is used? Do your examples use the term positively or negatively? How do your examples compare to the ways that the social gospel is defined by the author?

Chapter One

“A Perfect Man in a Perfect Society”: The Emergence of the Social Gospel in Nineteenth Century America

SUMMARY

This chapter focuses on the shifting nineteenth-century historical context of American Protestantism that gave birth to the social gospel. Framed against the backdrop of an era in which many evangelical Protestants sought to “Christianize” America and the world, the chapter explores how early social gospel pioneers such as Washington Gladden, Josiah Strong, and Frances Willard helped to shape the religious idealism that characterized the birth of the social gospel. These leaders mixed together aspects of an earlier evangelical heritage within a liberal theology, articulating what figures like Gladden described as “social salvation”—a belief that central to Christianity’s mission was the imperative to transform individuals as well as social structures.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What historical factors contributed to the rise of the social gospel during the nineteenth century?
2. How did changing demographics following the Civil War impact the social gospel?
3. What did Washington Gladden mean by the term “social salvation”?
4. How did late nineteenth-century Protestant women and African Americans model distinctive examples of “social salvation” within their ministries?

ASSIGNMENT/CLASS EXERCISES

Identify examples of contemporary religious and secular leaders who you think represent the concept of “social salvation” in their public careers. How did the figures that you selected compare/contrast to the figures of the late nineteenth century social gospel?

Chapter Two

Interpreting the “Golden Rule”: Turn-of-the Century Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish Reformers

SUMMARY

This chapter discusses how the social currents of the late nineteenth century contributed to the theological development of the social gospel. In particular, it pays attention to what was at times a symbiotic relationship between historical interpretations of Jesus and political socialism. Examining important figures such as Charles Sheldon, George Herron, Shailer Mathews, and Reverdy Ransom, the chapter also explores this connection among a wide cross section of Protestant churches to developing traditions of social reform within Catholicism and Judaism. These examinations underscore the ways in which Catholic and Jewish reform outlooks complemented and challenged the assumptions of the dominant Protestant churches.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did Protestant interpretations of Jesus’ historical significance influence the rise of the social gospel?
2. How did social gospel leaders relate their understandings of Jesus to models of political socialism?
3. What were the key similarities and differences between Protestant and Jewish visions of social reform in the late nineteenth century?
4. What was the significance of the papal document *Rerum Novarum* toward shaping a broader tradition of Catholic social teachings in the United States?

ASSIGNMENT/CLASS EXERCISES

Have students read Charles Sheldon’s novel *In His Steps* (available online at <https://archive.org/details/inhisstepswhatwo00shel>). How did Sheldon’s description of Jesus fit into the larger worldview of the late nineteenth-century social gospel? Why do you feel the expression “WWJD?” remains popular today?

Chapter Three

Kingdom Coming: The Social Gospel and “the Social Awakening” in the Early Twentieth Century

SUMMARY

This chapter investigates how the theology of the social gospel matured by the early twentieth century. Walter Rauschenbusch and his 1907 book, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, helped broaden the popularity of the social gospel in America. At the same time, Rauschenbusch’s social gospel was complemented by a wide range of reformers such as Harry F. Ward and Vida Dutton Scudder. Along with figures in American Judaism, such as Stephen Wise, and Catholicism, such as John Ryan, religion was at the center of what many Americans referred to in the early twentieth century as “the social awakening.”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did Walter Rauschenbusch contribute to the rise of the social gospel in America?
2. What were the primary emphases in the social creed of the Methodist Episcopal Church? How did the social creed impact the subsequent development of the social gospel in American Protestantism?
3. How did Stephen Wise, John Ryan, and Vida Dutton Scudder’s views on reform complement and challenge the dominant theological assumptions of Protestant social gospel leaders?
4. How did the predominant male leadership of the social gospel movement view issues related to gender equality?

ASSIGNMENT/CLASS EXERCISES

Read Leo XIII encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html) and selections from Walter Rauschenbusch’s *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. How do these two works compare/contrast with one another, especially related to specific models of political reform?

Chapter Four

“The Church Stands For...”: Institutionalizing the Social Gospel

SUMMARY

This chapter examines the social gospel’s institutional ascendancy within American religion, primarily within American Protestantism. The years from approximately 1908 to 1920 constituted an era in which the social gospel permeated the institutional fabric of numerous Protestant structures, transforming long-standing evangelical organizations like the YMCA, YWCA, and emerging bodies such as the Federal Council of Churches. On one hand, social gospel leaders like Rauschenbusch were confident of their institutional triumphs within American Protestantism. At the same time, developing theological and missional tensions inside and outside these institutions created a rupture that shaped the evolution of the social gospel tradition throughout the twentieth century.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did the rise of the Protestant ecumenical movement impact the development of the social gospel prior to the United States’ entry into World War I?
2. What was the significance of the YMCA and YWCA to the development of the social gospel?
3. How did World War I alter the theological and missional objectives of the social gospel?
4. How did Protestant responses to the Steel Strike of 1919 reflect significant changes in the development of the social gospel after World War I?

ASSIGNMENT/CLASS EXERCISES

Read the Interchurch World Movement’s “Report of the Steel Strike of 1919” (<https://archive.org/details/reportonsteelstr00inte>). What does the report identify as the key issues behind the Steel Strike? How does it respond to the accusation that the steel industry was filled with communist sympathizers?

Chapter Five

“After Rauschenbusch—What?”: The Social Gospel between the World Wars

SUMMARY

This chapter discusses the growth of the social gospel during the interwar period, from the early 1920s to the early 1940s. Part of the social gospel’s legacy can be seen in the foundation of organizations like the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and its partnership with older Protestant organizations like the YMCA. With leadership steeped in social gospel theology, the FOR and YMCA were instrumental in promoting radical economic reform and increasingly drawing attention to issues such as militarism, internationalism, pacifism, and racism. These organizations reflected a growing radicalism among younger Americans, who, while often alienated from institutionally-based religion, were drawn to a wide range of religious youth movements that served as a model for later social activism in the twentieth century.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What was the relationship between groups like the YMCA and the Fellowship of Reconciliation in terms of the dissemination of the social gospel during the interwar period?
2. How did *The Christian Century* play a formative role in the dissemination of social gospel ideals in the 1920s and 1930s?
3. What role did pacifism play in the dissemination of the social gospel during the interwar period?
4. What was the relationship between the social gospel and youth/young adults during the interwar period?

ASSIGNMENT/CLASS EXERCISES

Review at least one issue of *motive* magazine (<http://sth-archon.bu.edu/motive/motive.html>) from the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s). What are the chief social issues that animate the magazine’s discussion? How does the content and style of the journal change from its first issue in 1941 until its final one in 1972?

Chapter Six

Achieving the “Beloved Community”: Civil Rights, Vietnam, and the Twilight of the Social Gospel

SUMMARY

This chapter discusses the social gospel’s impact on the civil rights movement and how it engaged emerging currents from the religious and political left in the 1960s and 1970s. While Martin Luther King, Jr. is certainly the central figure in the story of the civil rights movement, King’s success was undergirded by a range of leaders who manifested various aspects of the social gospel heritage. Although King’s successes in nonviolent direct action represented a high-water mark for the social gospel in America, the years following his death witnessed a spate of theological critics of the social gospel. Just as some religious radicals in the 1920s and 1930s questioned many of the gradualist political suppositions of the classic social gospel, a range of Christian theologians raised issues about the extent to which the liberalism associated with the social gospel could be an effective instrument of social change in a postcolonial world.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did Howard Thurman and Benjamin Mays influence Martin Luther King, Jr.?
2. How did the ecumenical aspirations of the Federal Council and National Council of Churches reflect upon early social gospel beliefs for American society?
3. How did Martin Luther King, Jr.’s ideas build upon a foundation rooted in the social gospel?
4. How did emerging traditions of liberation theology critique and challenge the earlier assumptions of social gospel liberalism?

ASSIGNMENT/CLASS EXERCISES

Read the text or listen to recordings of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” and “A Time to Break Silence” speeches (for example, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihadream.htm>). How do these speeches reflect upon significant themes/ aspects of the social gospel movement?

Chapter Seven

An Evangelical Social Gospel?: The Christian Right and Progressive Evangelicalism

SUMMARY

This chapter examines the rise of the Christian Right in the late twentieth century, analyzing how many conservative evangelicals reinvigorated an older social gospel rhetoric of activism—from a politically conservative base. For many conservative evangelicals, the social gospel became a catch-all phrase to describe how religion was co-opted by the perceived radicalism of the left. While the emergence of the Christian Right was a major development of the late twentieth century, the chapter also examines a group commonly known as “progressive evangelicalism.” In many ways, Ronald Reagan’s election in 1980 was symbolic not only of the ascendancy of groups like the Christian Right, but of the institutional displacement of the religious left, associated with the heirs of the social gospel.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What theological themes did the religious right borrow from the classic social gospel?
2. How did conservative evangelicals appropriate the legacies of Walter Rauschenbusch and Martin Luther King, Jr. within their visions of social reform?
3. What are the chief characteristics of progressive evangelicalism as a movement? How does the movement compare to aspects of the earlier social gospel?
4. What have been the most significant demographic shifts in late twentieth century/ early twenty-first century American religion, and how have they impacted liberal religious institutions?

ASSIGNMENT/CLASS EXERCISES

Watch the video of the Rev. Paul Raushenbush discussing the influence of his Great-Grandfather, Walter Rauschenbusch (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OIE9NhvLoc>). How does Paul Raushenbush’s description of the social gospel relate to some of the wider historical tensions between religious evangelicals and religious progressives in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries?

Conclusion

SUMMARY

The book's conclusion reflects upon the social gospel's legacy in the early twenty-first century, providing a summation of its historical impact and its prospects in the twenty-first century.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What historical themes best summarize the role of the social gospel in American religious history?

ASSIGNMENT/CLASS EXERCISES

Read President Obama's Charleston speech: (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/26/remarks-president-eulogy-honorable-reverend-clementa-pinckney>). How do Obama's comments reflect upon different aspects of the social gospel movement?