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Fundamentals of Modern American History

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The Social Gospel Movement: What Can A Man Do?

Economic expansion in the U.S. during the late 19th century masked extreme poverty with material excesses. It was a time of technology innovation and big corporations. It was a time of real wage growth and ever-increasing labor force. But it was no “Golden Age”—it was the Gilded Age. Day by day people lived with problems caused by industrialization, urbanization, and political corruption. They found themselves suffering from terrible working conditions, losing jobs, losing hope. They were profoundly dissatisfied with what was going on and how they were governed. So, they started the Progressive Era as they decided to reform their future together, to address the real concerns for social crisis, the social questions for collective salvation—they set out the Social Gospel movement.

Terrible working conditions with long hours turned people into “a veritable machine,” the crisis was needed to be confronted by workers themselves to each other, to the employers, for the good of society. Samuel Gompers, a working man who wanted the labor movement to succeed, wrote in *What Does the Working Man Want* that, “The laborer has been regarded as a mere producing machine ... but back of labor is the soul of man and honesty of purpose and aspiration” (par 8). For a man, his soul and honesty were not simply commodities to be bought and sold. For a man, he needed people to relate so to make change together.

“I lost my job ten months ago. I am a printer by trade. The new linotype machines are beautiful specimens of invention, but I know six men who have killed themselves inside of the

year just on account of those machines. Of course I don't blame the newspapers for getting the machines. Meanwhile, what can a man do?" an unemployed migrant pouring his heart out to the pastor and people on a Sunday's sermon, in a 1896 best seller novel, *In His Steps "What Would Jesus Do?"* by Charles Sheldon (Sheldon 18). The novel explicitly connected to the Social Gospel movement. In it, the big questions regarding the understanding of the relationship between Jesus and man. What is it for man to think when he found himself defeated by social crisis?

The essential purpose of Christianity must be seen as the salvation of society to bring about a great revolution, a new order, Walter Rauschenbusch wrote in *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, 1907. Rauschenbusch was a theologian and Baptist pastor, a key figure of the Social Gospel movement, he wanted religion to recognize and play a part in the conflict of classes, "The vastness and the free sweep of our concentrated wealth on the one side, the independence, intelligence, moral vigor, and political power of the common people on the other side" (par 3-4). To Rauschenbusch, the social questions must be addressed to change the world-as-it-is into the world-as-it-ought-to-be, to successfully transform society into the Kingdom of God.

Walter Rauschenbusch later wrote *A Theory for the Social Gospel*. In it, he spoke of the Church as the social factor of salvation, and pointed out that the Church and the Kingdom of God are distinct, and also that the Church needs to vitalize the "nascent forces" of the Kingdom of God to be powered up for the coming age (118-130). Rauschenbusch wrote that, "The Kingdom ideal contains the revolutionary force of Christianity. When this ideal faded out of the systematic thought of the Church, it became a conservative social influence and increased the weight of the other stationary forces in society" (136). Rauschenbusch went on to say that, the salvation of the individual must be seen in relation with the Church and to the future life, and to the task of saving the social order.

There is always the need of putting theory into action for there to be solution for social and industrial problems. As Jane Addams put in *The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements* (1892), “We have in America a fast-growing number of cultivated young people who have no recognized outlet for their active faculties. They bear constantly of the great social maladjustment, but no way is provided for them to change it, and their uselessness bangs about them heavily.”

The social gospel movement has influenced generations later. It was the wing of the Progressive Era.

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