

The Social Gospel

Summary: Proponents of the “social gospel” connected social reform to scriptural ideals, calling for regulation of the rapidly industrializing, vastly unequal society that emerged in the late 1800s. The century that followed, characterized by war and social unrest, saw a series of Christian movements and intellectual positions that were indebted to social christianity, notably the Civil Rights Movement and the liberation theology emerging from progressive Latin American Catholicism.

The rapid growth of urban-industrial society in the late 19th century forced Christians to find new ways to express their social ideals in the face of overcrowded cities and vast inequities in access to services, power, and wealth. Working people deftly used scripture to critique the position of laborers in the industrial order. And soon a “social gospel” emerged in the Protestant mainstream, blossoming in the early 20th century. While theological conservatives drew upon traditions associated with revivalism, which tended to emphasize the moral reform of individuals, theological liberals called for a reconstruction of the social order itself. They insisted that churches needed to directly address the new realities of urban industrial life in Christian terms. Liberals found an articulate and confident voice in Walter Rauschenbusch, a Baptist who had worked with the poor in the area called Hell’s Kitchen in New York City. He used the biblical idea of the kingdom of God to articulate a progressive Christian vision of how to transform capitalist America into a cooperative Christian society. This social gospel pervaded the central institutions of the Protestant mainstream in the decades before the First World War.

Though the war destroyed the optimism of the preceding period, many Protestants found in Reinhold Niebuhr another powerful voice for a Christianity oriented toward social and ethical issues. As an urban pastor in Detroit, Niebuhr combined an interest in rigorous theology with a realistic approach to social justice and ethics. Together with his brother H. Richard Niebuhr, he championed a Christian social vision known as neo-orthodoxy (though Niebuhr himself loathed the word) that inspired many Protestants throughout the 20th century. While there had been a Federal Council of Churches since 1908, the new National Council of Churches, formed in 1951, became an important instrument through which mainline churches could articulate a common theological and social vision in a rapidly changing America.

Social Christianity also found expression in the Catholic community. Many Catholic immigrants took part in the tumultuous labor movements of the 19th century, and the 20th century saw a wave of Catholic social activists such as Cesar Chavez, Dorothy Day, and Peter and Daniel Berrigan. A formal framework for Catholic social thought and action was articulated by Pope Leo XIII in 1891 in the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, which critiqued both socialism and unfettered capitalism. Charting a distinctly Catholic alternative, it emphasized the right to property, the justice of fair wages, the right to unionize, and the mediating role of the state. It also served as a foundation for the development of Catholic Social Teaching, a key set of doctrines that address human dignity and the common good. These frameworks dovetailed with the social policies of the New Deal years and remain part of the teachings of the American Catholic leadership.

The turbulent 1960s were marked by a resurgence of Christian social action that took many forms. The Civil Rights Movement, under the leadership of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and other Black clergy, was a classic restatement of the Protestant social gospel in its insistence that the religious ideal of justice must be embodied in the institutions of society. Christian churches of many denominations were active in the movement for racial and economic justice. Liberation theologies, which originated among progressive Catholics in Latin America, articulated the gospel anew from the perspective of those who experience racial, political, and economic oppression. Many Christian women began to articulate feminist, mujerista, and womanist theologies, beginning with the voices and experiences of women who had been marginalized in both church and society. Many evangelical Christians also developed a strong voice on social issues, articulated in publications like *Sojourners* magazine.

By the time the Rev. Dr. King was assassinated in 1968, his vision had expanded to include anti-war and anti-poverty activism. But Black Militancy, opposition to the Vietnam War, and the 1960's "counterculture" combined to provoke a reaction from many in the "mainline" denominations who believed that their leadership and seminaries had become too strongly aligned with liberal and radical causes. In the 1970s and 1980s, the "Religious Right" captured this backlash, reframing Protestant involvement in social issues from a conservative perspective. Nevertheless, many Protestants and

Catholics have remained committed to social justice, and their activism has expanded to include ecological justice, feminism, and gay rights.