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# The Role of Faith in the Progressive Movement

Part Six of the Progressive Tradition Series

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Marta Cook and John Halpin October 2010

Center for American Progress



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*With the rise of the contemporary progressive movement and the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, there is extensive public interest in better understanding the origins, values, and intellectual strands of progressivism. Who were the original progressive thinkers and activists? Where did their ideas come from and what motivated their beliefs and actions? What were their main goals for society and government? How did their ideas influence or diverge from alternative social doctrines? How do their ideas and beliefs relate to contemporary progressivism?*

*The new Progressive Tradition Series from the Center for American Progress traces the development of progressivism as a social and political tradition stretching from the late 19th century reform efforts to the current day. The series is designed primarily for educational and leadership development purposes to help students and activists better understand the foundations of progressive thought and its relationship to politics and social movements. Although the Progressive Studies Program has its own views about the relative merit of the various values, ideas, and actors discussed within the progressive tradition, the essays included in the series are descriptive and analytical rather than opinion-based. We envision the essays serving as primers for exploring progressivism and liberalism in more depth through core texts—and in contrast to the conservative intellectual tradition and canon. We hope that these papers will promote ongoing discourse about the proper role of the state and individual in society, the relationship between empirical evidence and policymaking, and how progressives today might approach specific issues involving the economy, health care, energy-climate change, education, financial regulation, social and cultural affairs, and international relations and national security.*

*Part six examines how the social gospel movement and liberal Catholicism influenced the direction of progressive activism and thought during the 19th and 20th centuries.*

# Introduction

There have historically been two primary strands of progressive thought concerning the proper relationship between faith and politics—one secular and the other emerging directly from religious social values.

Secular progressive thought, associated with Enlightenment liberalism, is skeptical about particular religious claims in a pluralistic society, and insistent upon keeping religion out of politics and politics out of religion. Prominent American liberals such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, among others, strongly advocated freedom of conscience, religious tolerance, and strict separation of church and state as represented in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. This classical liberalism placed a premium on rationality, self-determination, and personal morality above faith, church authority, and public morality. It looked to establish a constitutional order in America that would prevent the merging of religion and government that was prevalent in Europe.

Many religious authorities during this time, most notably the Catholic Church, viewed liberalism as a “sin” and worked hard to stop its spread in Europe and America before reconciling Catholic teaching with liberal democracy.<sup>1</sup> They disagreed with the liberal conception of faith and politics, which was best represented by the religious freedom and disestablishment clauses of the First Amendment. But these progressive beliefs eventually triumphed in this country as most Americans came to accept that one could freely practice their faith while keeping specific religious beliefs from taking over government and threatening the religious freedom of others.

An equally powerful strand of progressive thought emerged directly from religious values during the social gospel movement. These reformers argued that Christians should apply their teachings to public problems. American Protestant ministers and theologians during the 19th century such as Walter Rauschenbusch espoused this belief, as did politicians such as William Jennings Bryan, and settlement founders such as Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr. Catholic social justice

leaders such as Fr. John Ryan and Dorothy Day pushed for similar values and religious activism, and later civil rights leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. followed suit. Many of the most prominent social movements in American progressive history would not have been possible without the inspirational values and moral authority of socially conscious Christianity and Judaism, an idea that we explore in more detail in see part three of this series, “Social Movements and Progressivism.”

Progressives working within these faith traditions applied religious morality to the task of transforming American society during the industrial age away from the exploitation of workers and toward more cooperative forms of economic life. These faith-driven progressives insisted that society and governments uphold the fundamental notion that all people are equal in God’s eyes and deserve basic dignity, freedom, political rights, and economic opportunities in life. Religious progressives promoted the notion of community and solidarity above concepts of individualism and materialism, and worked to stop unnecessary wars and military aggression across the globe.

The social gospel movement and Catholic social teaching played influential roles in the progressive search for economic fairness and justice in the 20th century. Both traditions promoted the belief that any true commitment to the Gospels and the example of Jesus Christ demanded followers to take concrete steps to address oppression and hardship in this world and to replace the laissez-faire attitudes of the late 19th century with a more communitarian outlook. In his famous book, *Progress and Poverty*, Henry George, a popular economist and social gospel adherent, rejected the traditional notion of religion that allowed the “rich Christian to bend on Sundays in a nicely upholstered pew... without any feeling of responsibility for the squalid misery that is festering but a square away.”

Walter Rauschenbusch’s 1907 classic book, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, served as the most complete statement of faith-based progressivism and offered a compelling argument for the social application of the Gospels. Rauschenbusch stressed how “the essential purpose of Christianity was to transform human society into the kingdom of God by regenerating all human relations and reconstituting them in accordance with the will of God.” The purpose of this argument was to show people how Christian teachings and the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Bible could be put to use to foment social change during a period of want and suffering: “If anyone holds that religion is essentially ritual and sacramental; or that it is purely personal; or that God is on the side of the rich; or that social interest is likely to lead preachers astray; he must prove his case with his eye on the Hebrew prophets, and the burden of proof is with him.”<sup>2</sup>



Henry George rejected the traditional notion of religion that allowed the “rich Christian to bend on Sundays in a nicely upholstered pew... without any feeling of responsibility for the squalid misery that is festering but a square away.”

PHOTO: PORTRAIT OF HENRY GEORGE, PUBLIC DOMAIN

Rauschenbusch took on what he called “the present crisis” wrought by the industrial revolution and the rise of modern capitalism, arguing that Christian civilization could no longer withstand the injustices of contemporary times—inequality, poverty, physical deprivation and hunger, worker abuses. He believed that desperate times required genuine moral leadership, and he sought to humanize capitalism by encouraging more direct action. He supported movements such as the settlement houses—urban community centers where low-income people could go for services and classes—as well as labor organizing and solidarity, and Christian volunteerism from preachers and groups like the YMCA and the Salvation Army. Above all, Rauschenbusch counseled people to put their theological principles to work personally by adding “spiritual power along the existing and natural relations of men to direct them to truer ends and govern them by higher motives.”<sup>3</sup>

On the Catholic side, Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, served as the intellectual and theological basis for a new generation of social activism among American Catholics. The Pope’s statement on capital and labor sought to find a humane path for capitalism that respected workers and avoided the extremes of both socialism and laissez-faire conservatism. *Rerum Novarum* affirmed the state’s right to intervene on behalf of citizens, endorsed unionization, and also affirmed property rights. Its teachings provided a moral and theological basis for generations of Catholic social justice reform most famously seen in Monsignor John Ryan’s “Bishop’s Program of Social Reconstruction” in 1919 and later actions during the New Deal.<sup>4</sup>

Progressives today come in many stripes, and nonbelievers and believers alike have managed to find common ground on key areas from climate change and poverty to war and social policy. This report seeks to explore the religious roots of progressivism in more detail, given the primary role that faith played in the development of the original progressive movement and in later civil rights and antiwar activism. This paper is designed to begin discussions about the role of faith in progressive politics and is not intended to cover every theological nuance or the wide range of important thinking in other religious and secular traditions.

# The social gospel tradition

It is instructive to look back on the tremendous influence that a “uniquely American” theology, the social gospel, had on progressivism at the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>5</sup> The social gospel was at once both a visionary theology and a reactive one. The pastors who created this new way of thinking about sin and salvation were horrified by the ravaging effects of the new industrial economy on poor and working class Americans. They saw Protestant Christianity becoming vacuous and obsolete as many middle- and upper-class Americans who professed to be Christians turned their backs on their fellow brothers and sisters—many who were immigrants—who were forced to live and work under horrible conditions.

Social gospel theology offered a radical critique of the individualistic strain of Protestantism that had taken root in America and put forth in its place a vision of Christianity focused on Christ’s social teachings rather than ceremony and personal virtue. Its theological roots trace back to Horace Bushnell, a Congregational pastor and theologian during the mid-19th century. Charles H. Hopkins, the first great social gospel historian, writes that Bushnell’s book *Christian Nurture* “did more than any single factor to break down the extreme individualism of the old Puritanism.”<sup>6</sup>

Social gospel theologians like Bushnell attacked the core assumption in Protestant theology that both sin and salvation should only be understood from a personal, individual framework. The great social gospel theologian Walter Rauschenbusch put forward some of the most ringing critiques of American Protestantism. Rauschenbusch spent part of his career ministering in New York City’s Hell’s Kitchen and excoriated American Christians for being so singularly focused on personal morality at the expense of neglecting a Christian’s calling to follow the message of Jesus. He wrote in *A Theology for the Social Gospel* that:

*An unawakened person does not inquire on whose life juices his big dividends are fattening. Upper-class minds have been able to live parasitic lives without any fellow-feeling for the peasants or tenants whom they were draining to pay for their leisure. Modern democracy brings these lower fellow-men up to our field*



[Horace Bushnell’s book] did more than any single factor to break down the extreme individualism of the old Puritanism.

PHOTO: PORTRAIT OF HORACE BUSHNELL, PUBLIC DOMAIN

*of vision. Then, if a man has drawn any real religious feeling from Christ, his participation in the systematized oppression of civilization will, at least at times, seem an intolerable burden of guilt.*<sup>7</sup>

Social gospel theologians called American Christians to account, asking them to consider what Jesus spent most of his time on Earth doing—namely, caring for the poor and oppressed. Baptist theologian Shailer Mathews defines the social gospel as the “application of the teaching of Jesus and the total message of the Christian salvation to society, the economic life, and social institutions such as the state [and] the family, as well as to individuals.”<sup>8</sup> The upper-middle-class and wealthy Protestant Americans were profiting enormously from the exponential growth of GDP with the rise of the new industrial order, and social gospel theologians demanded that Christians were called to help lift up the poor among them. Simply put, Protestantism had become “too comfortable, individualistic, and otherworldly.”<sup>9</sup>

This message of social concern could come at no better moment. The industrial revolution of the late 19th century had created an economic structure that prevented most working class Americans from ever reaching a comfortable position in life. American workers in big cities such as New York and Chicago were crammed into filthy tenements, working 14-hour days without ever earning enough to live a life of decency. Poor children were forced to work in factories that posed great danger to them.

Rauschenbusch and others did not see these life conditions as a result of personal failings, since American workers were putting in long, hard hours and not committing any sort of personal moral failing. Social gospel theologians argued that there were systemic failings in the new American economic order, that the industrial capitalists used their financial power to create a system that allowed them to accrue enormous wealth, while at the same time ensuring what was tantamount to economic slavery among the lower classes.

The social gospel began as a theological project among a few theologians and pastors, but it soon became a popular movement mainly due to the interest of mainline denominational churches, the influence of popular novels and muckraking articles on the industrial problems plaguing modern society, and its growing confluence with the broader Progressive movement.

The social gospel pastors seemed to strike a chord among the broader public due to their belief that Christianity needed to speak in a reforming, prophetic way to the modern industrial era. Reverend Charles M. Sheldon penned one such book,



Rauschenbusch excoriated American Christians for being so singularly focused on personal morality at the expense of neglecting a Christian’s calling to follow the message of Jesus.

PHOTO: PORTRAIT OF WALTER RAUSCHENBUSCH, PUBLIC DOMAIN

*In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?*, which coined the famous expression found on millions of bracelets today and sold 30 million copies, making it the 39th best-selling book of all time. Sheldon argued in his book that Jesus should be viewed as a moral guide for actions in this life and not just a savior of mankind.

*In His Steps* directly influenced Walter Rauschenbusch's social gospel perspective. And muckraking journalists such as Lincoln Steffens and Ida Tarbell, perhaps unconsciously, also played a key role in turning a small cadre of social gospel advocates into a true movement. These reporters in the early 1900s detailed the corruption rampant in business and government and forced Americans to face the underbelly of modern industrial capitalism. Many even used the terminology and imagery of evangelicalism, referring to what they described as "sin, greed, guilt, salvation, righteousness, and soul."<sup>10</sup>

One of the most important embodiments of the social gospel tradition was the growth of "institutional churches" and religious social settlements that supported all sorts of public goods, including kindergarten classes, employment search offices, soup kitchens, and open forums.<sup>11</sup> These churches and social settlements acted on a spiritual calling to nurture the body, mind, and soul of all who were interested—whether they were church members or not. Churches began acting as community centers for the first time beginning in the late 19th century, and church practitioners of the social gospel movement led the American church into a more progressive direction, refocusing its efforts on winning back the working classes who no longer felt represented by the modern church's middle-class atmosphere.

Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr founded perhaps the most famous social settlement, Hull House, to bring the values of Christian faith to the poor and dispossessed in Chicago. Thousands of local immigrants would visit the house each week at its height for educational and civic opportunities. Hull House was not a charity but rather an open environment for poor families to escape the hardships of work and tenement life and to share with others ideas about social problems, politics, literature, and art, and advance their own educational status.

The social gospel achieved formal religious legitimacy and more widespread visibility when it became an accepted part of the mainline churches' teachings and social actions. The Episcopal church leadership took the first major formal action by a denomination when it established a Joint Commission on Capital and Labor, charged with examining labor issues and unrest and serving as mediators between bosses and their workers.<sup>12</sup> The National Council of Churches soon followed suit,



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PHOTO: PORTRAIT OF JANE ADDAMS, PUBLIC DOMAIN

establishing a Committee on Labor. The Presbyterian Church of the USA's labor ministry, led by Charles Stelzle, served as a liaison to the American Federation of Labor.<sup>13</sup> This mediation was the first of its kind and helped to bridge the class gap between Protestant churches and the working class.

Most social gospel advocates did not, however, call for the organized church to directly lobby Congress or the state legislatures about policy. Their primary purpose was to encourage individual Christians and reformers to live out their values and beliefs in the political and social realm. They saw the church's role as an educator of the Christian conscience and a way to instill Jesus's social values and teachings into the hearts of Christians so that they could reform and revolutionize social immorality.<sup>14</sup> These pastors believed that Christian values were the needed to root out the personal and social sin crippling American society.

The social gospel became a major part of the larger progressive movement when its leaders changed their focus from academic arguments to the "present crisis" of the lived experience of millions of poor Americans. Rauschenbusch, Mathews, and other writers began using the motif of "crisis" starting around 1910 to capture the movement's urgency in American history, both in terms of the danger of doing nothing and also the opportunity in reimagining a more socially and economically just society. Donald Gorrell argues that this shift in frame and focus from the "social question" to the "social crisis" was critical in moving from the abstract to the concrete, from the academic to urgent reality.<sup>15</sup>

Proponents of the social gospel were instrumental in forming the Progressive Party in 1912 and helped to craft the party's social reform agenda of fair wages, workplace regulations, social security and unemployment measures, national health care, conservation, and industrial reform. These social gospel progressives pressed notions of brotherhood and social solidarity above individualism and greed, and paved the way for significant legislative reforms during the Wilson and Roosevelt presidencies. This fighting faith was reflected in the party's unofficial anthem, "Onward Christian Soldiers," and Teddy Roosevelt's famous proclamation during his acceptance speech to lead the Progressive Party, "We stand at Armageddon and we battle for the Lord."<sup>16</sup>

## Liberal Catholicism and progressive reform

The Catholic Church was a traditionally conservative institution that had been hostile to liberalism in the 19th century. But a new spirit of reform took hold at roughly the same time as the social gospel movement. Pope Leo XIII issued what is often considered to be a founding document in Catholic social teaching in 1891. The encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, which translates to “On the Condition of Workers,” offers specific reflections on how the Church’s beliefs applied to society, the state, and the economy at that time.

Pope Leo’s primary concern in this document was to focus Catholic attention on the appalling state of workers in modern life who faced increasing hardship, oppression, and inadequate wages during the industrial age. He called this condition an affront to human dignity and the common good—the notion that the material and spiritual good of each person is connected to the good of others. He argued that the state had a duty to take the needy under its care and that industrialists had a responsibility to treat their workers fairly and to pay them a decent wage:

*Equity therefore commands that public authority show proper concern for the worker so that from what he contributes to the common good he may receive what will enable him, housed, clothed, and secure, to live his life without hardship. Whence, it follows that all those measures ought to be favored which seem in any way capable of benefiting the condition of workers. Such solicitude is so far from injuring anyone, that it is destined rather to benefit all, because it is of absolute interest to the State that those citizens should not be miserable in every respect from whom such necessary goods proceed.<sup>17</sup>*

The Catholic Church was hoping to build consensus around a middle ground between revolutionary socialism gaining steam in Europe and a laissez-faire approach to economics that argued against any efforts to address the conditions of workers. This communitarian vision of individual rights, private property, and cooperation among the classes, coupled with state concern for the poor and the rights of labor unions, formed the basis of the early welfare state in Europe along with many of the ideas that flourished in the United States under Franklin Roosevelt.



Pope Leo XIII argued that the state had a duty to take the needy under its care and that industrialists had a responsibility to treat their workers fairly and to pay them a decent wage.

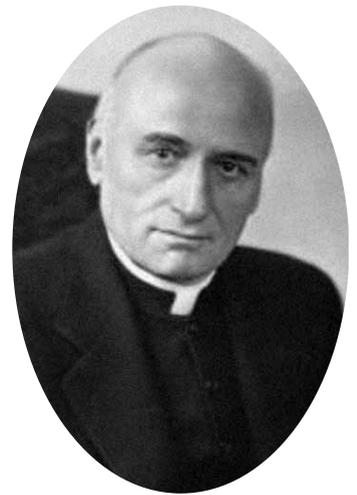
PHOTO: PORTRAIT OF POPE LEO XIII, PUBLIC DOMAIN

Pope Pius XI later expanded upon these “third way” ideas in his 1931 encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*, which translates to “The Fortieth Year.” He argued that states could avoid the excesses of individualism and collectivism by applying the principle of “subsidiarity,” where necessary state action to secure individual dignity works primarily through the traditional social structures of families, neighborhoods, and local parishes. He stated, “Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do.”<sup>18</sup>

John Ryan, a Catholic priest deeply influenced by *Rerum Novarum*, turned the church’s emerging social doctrine into a concrete set of political demands. He first outlined these policies in the bishops’ “Program of Social Reconstruction” in 1919, and they included advocating for a living wage, housing, social insurance, labor rights, and “co-partnership” of workers in the management and ownership of business. Ryan and the bishops called for a return to Christian values and new spirit of altruism and cooperation between rich industrialists and their workers:

*The laborer must come to realize that he owes his employer and society an honest day’s work in return for a fair wage, and that conditions cannot be substantially improved until he roots out the desire to get a maximum of return for a minimum of service. The capitalist must likewise get a new viewpoint. He needs to learn the long-forgotten truth that wealth is stewardship, that profit making is not the basic justification of business enterprise, and that there are such things as fair profits, fair interest, and fair prices. Above and before all, he must cultivate and strengthen within his mind the truth ... that the laborer is a human being, not merely an instrument of production; and that the laborer’s right to a decent livelihood is the first moral charge upon industry... This is the human and Christian, in contrast to the purely commercial and pagan, ethics of industry.*<sup>19</sup>

Ryan’s pioneering work played a critical role in the development of the New Deal program, which greatly expanded labor rights, created an American-style welfare state, and shifted the balance in political thought away from conservative individualism and toward new ideas of cooperation and solidarity.<sup>20</sup> Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin complimented this theoretical and policy shift by launching the Catholic Worker movement during the height of the depression in 1933. They sought to provide direct support for the poor (mostly in urban areas) and to encourage a larger Catholic ethic of nonviolence, concern for human dignity, and solidarity with the least well off.



Ryan and the bishops called for a return to Christian values and new spirit of altruism and cooperation between rich industrialists and their workers.

PHOTO: PORTRAIT OF MONSIGNOR JOHN A. RYAN, THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA ARCHIVES

The Catholic worker movement was designed, like the Protestant social gospel, to bring the life and teachings of Jesus into direct action against exploitation and violence in the lives of the poor. Catholic worker communities today choose to live in voluntary poverty in order to be more directly involved in the lives of the neediest and to be free to practice nonviolent actions against oppression in government or society. Catholic worker groups and their offshoots play prominent roles in combating poverty, racism, war, and militarism.<sup>21</sup>

The Catholic Church's influence on progressive politics grew again during the papacy of Pope John XXIII and the reforms of the second Vatican Council. Pope John's 1963 encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, which translates to "Peace on Earth," formally committed the church to an expansive vision of human rights similar to the ones outlined in the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

*Pacem in Terris* aligned Church teachings with concrete rights to political and individual freedom, self-determination, and social and economic security declaring that, "Any human society, if it is to be well-ordered and productive, must lay down as a foundation this principle, namely, that every human being is a person ... because one is a person one has rights and obligations flowing directly and simultaneously from one's very nature. And as these rights and obligations are universal and inviolable, so they cannot in any way be surrendered."<sup>22</sup> *Pacem in Terris* was written at the peak of the Cold War and the major transformations of American life in the 1960s, and it went on to inspire progressive actions in support of civil rights and the Catholic Church's efforts to combat communism and promote human rights for people across the globe.

The relationship between Catholicism and progressivism has grown more acrimonious since the upheavals of the 1960's—particularly around discussions of reproductive rights, homosexuality, the death penalty, and the role of women. But Catholic social teaching has played a central role in the development of progressive political action over the years and has contributed to the progressive search for a more humane social and governmental order. As President Roosevelt stated in honor of John Ryan's contributions to the New Deal, "With voice and pen you have pleaded the cause of social justice and the right of the individual to happiness through economic security, a living wage, and an opportunity to share in the things that enrich and ennoble human life."<sup>23</sup> This legacy of Catholic social action may not be well known to many contemporary progressives, but it is a critical one worth considering today.

# Conclusion

The secular tradition will always play a prominent role in progressivism, as it has since the inception of the country, but the ideas of the social gospel and liberal Catholicism can continue to serve as prophetic voices in the modern era. As Christopher Lasch notes, “[I]n many ways, the most important contribution of religion to social movements ... is a type of hopefulness at once more modest and more durable than the hopes associated with the idea of progress” found in various secular ideologies.<sup>24</sup> Religion should never be put in the service of specific political agendas, but it can play an important role in driving public discourse and determining what occupies our public officials’ attention.

The moral call-to-action provided by the progressive religious tradition is desperately needed and warranted at a time when poverty is at record highs and economic inequality reaches levels not seen since the Gilded Age. The core values of human dignity, compassion, cooperation, and solidarity built into these traditions can serve as powerful correctives to the rampant materialism, selfishness, and greed that threaten working- and middle-class families today. Just as religious voices helped spark the great transformations of the Progressive and New Deal eras, similarly inspired voices today can take the lead in forming a renewed vision of individual rights, societal duty, and the common good.

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