



MANHATTAN UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

The Role of Faith in the Progressive Movement

Part Six of the Progressive Tradition Series

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.¹ 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.”²



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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.”³

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.⁴

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 Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

