

Adventist Society for Religious Studies

THE SOCIAL GOSPEL MOVEMENT AND ADVENTISM IN THE LATE  
NINETEENTH TO EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY IN  
THE UNITED STATES

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## Introduction

The Social Gospel is a religious social-reform movement prominent in the United States from about 1870 to 1920. This paper offers a historical overview of the movement, outlining the major influences on its emergence, and its basic theological presuppositions with regards to soteriology, and eschatology, as laid down in Walter Rauschenbusch's *A Theology for the Social Gospel*. Furthermore, the paper presents an Adventist's critique and contrast to the Social Gospel, unveiling the cause of the reticence of the Adventist church to embrace the movement.

## Historical Development

### Theological and Philosophical Context

The formation of American Protestant liberalism,<sup>1</sup> which became a full-fledged doctrine in the nineteenth century, was influenced by Europe with several movements. One of the main influences came from Arminianism, or Arminian theology. Jacob Arminius (1559/60–1609) “rejected the Calvinist notion of predestination and stressed individualism and free will.”<sup>2</sup> Armenians believed that individuals played a role in obtaining their salvation, and many American Protestants who embraced liberalism used Arminian theology to critique Calvinist ideas. A second influence came from the

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<sup>1</sup> Burnidge “Protestant Liberalism,” *Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, 1:1783. “In religion, *liberalism* refers not to a political paradigm but to philosophical and religious positions with social, economic, and political implications. Unlike conservative Protestants, Liberal Protestants display an interest in adapting Protestant thought and practice to modern challenges. Unlike secular humanism, liberal Protestants prefer to work within existing social, economic and political structure.”

<sup>2</sup> Burnidge, 3:1783.

European Enlightenment with philosophers such as John Locke (1632–1704) who argued that “humans received knowledge through their ability to reason rather than from God.”<sup>3</sup>

Other scholars such as Sir Isaac Newton (1642 –1727) “challenged the dominant Christian conceptions of the universe by explaining nature through physical laws rather than revelation.”<sup>4</sup> American liberalism was further influenced by “Enlightenment values of intellectual inquiry, religious toleration, and the use of reason and empiricism.”<sup>5</sup>

Protestant American liberalism developed into a distinctive movement with the emergence of Unitarianism in the early nineteenth-century. Unitarians distanced themselves from other Protestants on the basis of their “denial of the Trinity, the notion that God exists in the three forms: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”<sup>6</sup>

Alongside the consolidation of Protestant liberalism among Unitarians and Transcendentalists, liberalism also had a presence among evangelicals,<sup>7</sup> who “rejected orthodox Calvinism and its strict adherence to the doctrine of original sin and

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<sup>3</sup> Burnidge, 3:1783.

<sup>4</sup> Burnidge, 3:1783.

<sup>5</sup> Burnidge, 3:1783.

<sup>6</sup> Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion 1805-1900* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 27. Major proponents of Unitarianism are William Ellery Channing (1780–1842)—who insisted to use reason when reading the Bible, and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1838)—who challenged the historicity of Jesus’ miracles, “insisted that supernatural beings were not necessary for revelation because humans could pursue and find religious truth,” and founded a “loosely knit intellectual and literary movement known as transcendentalism.” (See Burnidge, 1:1784)

<sup>7</sup> Main figures, collectively known as “Princes of the Pulpit,” included Episcopalian Philips Brooks (1885–1893), Congregationalists Horace Bushnell (1802–1876), Henry Ward Beecher (1813–1887), and Lyman Abbott (1835–1922).

determinism,” while they “embraced biblical criticism, science, and scholarship.”<sup>8</sup>

Liberalism moved toward maturity following the Civil War and the rapid industrialization and urbanization. This was the time when American scholars began to follow trends among European intellectuals who “dramatically departed from traditional approaches to Christian thought and history.”<sup>9</sup> Comparative religion became a field of study in higher education, with Max Mueller (1823–1900) promoting the “scientific” study of religion. The field of social science emerged in the early twentieth century as an empirical study of formally “moral” topics such as economic, politics, and society.<sup>10</sup> Social science and theology merged with the academic study of Christian ethics. “University courses that addressed Christianity’s approach to public issues such as poverty, capitalism, and unionization became common place.”<sup>11</sup> Thus was born another form of Protestant liberalism, Social Gospel.

#### Socio-economic context

The Social Gospel emerged during the period between the Civil War and the dawn of the twentieth century, a period of great prosperity in the United States, known as

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<sup>8</sup> Burnidge, 1785. See also William R. Hutchinson, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Durham: Duke University, 1992), 4–75.

<sup>9</sup> Burnidge, 1:1785. Under the influence of German theologians such as Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889), Adolf Von Harnack (1851–1930), there had been a greater focus on both “redemption of sin and regeneration of society for the kingdom of God,” and “critical examination of historical texts,” especially the Gospels, which, according to Harnack, “did not require metaphysics, dogma, or even institutions (Burnidge 1:1786).

<sup>10</sup> Burnidge, 1:1786.

<sup>11</sup> Burnidge, 1:1786.

the Gilded Age.<sup>12</sup> However, wealth was not distributed evenly, leading to indecent social disparity.<sup>13</sup> Andrew Carnegie, a famous prosperous businessman during the Gilded Age period, praised and justified the social inequality of his days, on the basis of Darwinian “survival of the fittest” principle.<sup>14</sup> He insisted that this “intense Individualism,” despite its negative social effects, was the foundation upon which civilization rests.

The Social Gospel had come as an answer to the Gospel of Wealth that was propounded by Andrew Carnegie.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Theology of the Social Gospel**

One way the Social Gospel differs from the Gospel of Wealth, which was based on an intense individualism, is through its theology, particularly its soteriology and eschatology. Regarding soteriology, it interprets the Kingdom of God as requiring social

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<sup>12</sup> Allan Axelrod, *The Gilded Age: 1876 – 1912 Overture to the American Century* (New York, NY: Sterling, 2017), 2, 3. Also Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987), xvii. Nell Irvin Painter reported that by the end of the nineteenth-century, steel production soared to such an extent that United States of America (USA) had exceeded the combined outputs of its two rivals, Great Britain and Germany, and could boast to become the “granary of the world.”

<sup>13</sup> Here is how Painter describes the picture: The wealthiest 1 percent of families in 1890 owned 51 percent of the real and personal property; the percent of families at the bottom owned only 1.2 percent of all the property. Together, the wealthy and well-to-do (12 percent of families) owned 86 percent of the wealth. The poorer and middle classes, who represented 88 percent of families, owned 14 percent of the wealth (Painter, xix).

<sup>14</sup> For Carnegie, the USA owes its wonderful material progress to the law of competition, which needs to be sustained at all costs, and even if it is “sometimes hard on the individual, it is best for the race, because it insures the survival of the fittest in every department” (Carnegie, 16, 17). He exposed his philosophy of “Wealth” in an article he published in June 1889 in the *North American Review*.<sup>14</sup> He states that “We accept and welcome great inequality of environment; the concentration of business, industrial and commercial, in the hands of a few; and the law of competition between these, as being not only beneficial, but essential to the future progress of the human race.”

<sup>15</sup> Arthur Hiebert, *The Theology of the Social Gospel and the Seventh-day Adventists* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University, 1971), 5.

as well as individual salvation and sought the betterment of industrialized society through application of the biblical principles of charity and justice.<sup>16</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch<sup>17</sup> rejected what he calls the “old theology” that stresses on the “power and guilt of sin.”<sup>18</sup> The Social Gospel theology rather concentrates on “questions of public morality, on wrongs done by whole classes or profession of men, on sins which enervate and submerge entire mill towns or agricultural states.”<sup>19</sup>

Rauschenbusch calls groups or communities<sup>20</sup> “super-personal forces,” which are immeasurably more potent and enduring than individuals.<sup>21</sup> While they are created with good intentions, they often “drift into evil under sinister leadership, or under the pressure of need or temptation,”<sup>22</sup> and when this happens, they become super-personal forces of

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<sup>16</sup> Dorrien, *The Making of American Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion 1805-1900*, 311–312.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, was a clergyman and theology professor who led the Social Gospel movement in the United States. Reinhold Niebuhr calls Rauschenbusch “the real founder of social Christianity in this country. . . . Its most brilliant and generally satisfying exponent.” Rauschenbusch brought a harsh critique against systemic theology for its limitation in helping the minister assist the people on the social level. Rauschenbusch and Gladden “saw great possibilities in combining forces against the social evils such as poverty, disease, and educational needs.”

<sup>18</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York, NY: Abingdon Press, 1917), 36.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York, NY: Abingdon Press, 1917), 36. Rauschenbusch considers the doctrine of the fall based on the Genesis account as “the product of speculative interest mainly, and that the most energetic consciousness of sin can exist without drawing from this doctrine.” Sin is not rebellion of a man against God as theology defines it. “Sin is not a private transaction between the sinner and God.” “Sin is essentially selfishness.”

<sup>20</sup> “High school fraternities; any college community; a trade union; the I. W. W.; the Socialist Party; Tammany Hall; any military organization; an officers’ corps; the police force; the inside group of a local political party; the Free Masons; the Grange; the legal profession; a conspiracy like the Black Hand” (Rauschenbusch, 71).

<sup>21</sup> Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 71.

<sup>22</sup> Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 71.

evil. What the Social Gospel considers of highest importance is the redemption of the “super-personal forces.”

Regarding eschatology, the idea of a millennial hope was seen as a force of benefit to mankind, along with the Social Gospel.

Our chief interest in any millennium is the desire for a social order in which the worth and freedom of every least human being will be honoured and protected; . . . and in which the spiritual good of humanity will be set high above the private profit interests of all materialistic groups.<sup>23</sup>

However, regarding the way this Christian ideal will be fulfilled, Rauschenbusch urges to “shift from catastrophe to development” terminology. He sees the coming of the Kingdom of God in all ethical and spiritual progress of humankind.<sup>24</sup>

The theology of the Social Gospel has been criticized by conservative thinkers, and even by its former defendant, Reinold Niebuhr, who questioned its importance.<sup>25</sup> We will now turn to an Adventist critique of the Social Gospel.

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<sup>23</sup> Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 224.

<sup>24</sup> Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 225.

<sup>25</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God of America* (Chicago, IL: Willett, Clark & Co., 1937), 77. Alongside Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr used to view sin as social phenomenon and capitalism as immoral, but after witnessing the two World Wars, he changed his mind against the concepts of the Social Gospel. He found that the Social Gospel was unrealistic in its outlook, and that it contradicts the Bible and its concept of man. Niebuhr was skeptical about the idea that a perfect world could be established in the present corrupt world, as the leaders of the Social Gospel pretended. Niebuhr described the Social Gospel as “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgement through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.” See also “religion,” *Great Issues in American Life. A Conspectus, Vol. II: The Annals of America: A History* (Chicago: Wm, 1968), 434.

## Adventist Critique of the Social Gospel Theology

Arthur Hiebert, an Adventist theologian, criticized the Social Gospel, arguing that “the foundation of its theology was not balanced, and would therefore not be able to endure.”<sup>26</sup> He observed that Adventists were not blind nor indifferent to the conditions of laboring classes and the poor for whom the future had little or nothing to offer. Ellen White wrote, “The conditions that face Christian workers in the great cities, constitute a solemn appeal for untiring effort in behalf of the millions living within the shadow of impending doom.”<sup>27</sup>

However, Adventists adopted “realism” over the “idealism” of the social gospelers. Adventists believed that the main object in working with people was to be the conversion of men and women to Christ. A transformation of the heart brings remedy to the problem at its root, and when this objective has been reached, the person would be on his way to become independent of others, and able to work for Christ toward the salvation of others<sup>28</sup> White also called for balance in every part of the work: “We talk and write much about the neglected poor; should not some attention be given also to the neglected rich?”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Arthur Hiebert, *The Theology of the Social Gospel and the Seventh-day Adventists* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University, 1971), 5.

<sup>27</sup> Ellen G. White, *Present Truth and Review and Herald Articles*, vol. 6 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald), 27.

<sup>28</sup> Hiebert, 10, 11.

<sup>29</sup> Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1946), 555.

Other important considerations in Adventist social welfare include the distinction between those poor who have caused their own poverty and those who came into that situation of distress without being able to control the circumstances. Adventists should focus on the latter group, and while helping them, it is of utmost importance to restore their self-respect and dignity. Rather than keeping them in a state of dependency, they should be given opportunities to be of benefit to others. Ellen White states that “Instead of encouraging the poor that they can have their eating and drinking provided free or nearly so, we should place them where they can help themselves. We should endeavor to provide them with work, and if necessary teach them how to work.”<sup>30</sup> Another way to build their self-esteem is to encourage the poor to have a part in giving to God: “The poor are not to be excluded from the privilege of giving.”<sup>31</sup>

Hiebert gives a synopsis of the Adventist Church’s overall attitude in the context of the rise of the Social Gospel movement in late eighteenth to early nineteenth century:

The main goal of the Adventist movement was to restore men to his proper relationship to God, yet various areas of need were taken care of. Examples of this includes the work of J. H. Kellogg who trained medical workers to take care of the sick, but also “provide the funds for the education of many young people, virtually rearing 40 boys and girls, and adopting many of them.”<sup>32</sup> Mrs. Haskell built a home for orphans near Battle Creek, Michigan, to take care of the need in that area. Another remarkable action is the work of J. E. White in 1893. He initiated a floating mission station on the Mississippi River called “The Morning Star” for the benefit of the negro people.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. VI (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 278.

<sup>31</sup> Ellen G. White, *Welfare Ministry* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1952) 203.

<sup>32</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. IX (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 41.

<sup>33</sup> Hiebert, 13.

## **Conclusion**

The Social Gospel is rooted in American Protestant liberalism, which was largely influenced by the ideologies of the Progressive Era during late nineteenth century. The Seventh-day Adventist Church, while distancing itself from the Social Gospel, had fought for social issues of its time by implementing a form of social welfare programs as part of the gospel rather than replacing it. Adventists' primary focus had been on the salvation of the soul of individuals, drawing on the belief that total social redemption will be a reality only at the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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