

*SIMUȚ Ciprian*¹:

The Social Gospel Movement. An Overview

Abstract.

The Social Gospel movement developed in a time of intense urbanization and industrialization. The social context, generated by economic and political mishandlings, generated social pressure, poverty, and abuse, mainly on the poor and working classes. The Social Gospel movement tried to address the issues by applying Christian principles to social structures, as a result of political and economic changes. The promoters of the movement aligned their view of the ideal society with the eschatological perspective of premillennialism. They argued that a society that eliminates social evil is the Kingdom of God fulfilled. The movement managed to draw attention to social injustice, and it even managed to offer several productive means of alleviating the social evils it fought against. Despite its positive effects, the movement was criticized for failing to address issues such as race and gender. In this paper, the aim is to offer an introductory description of the Social Gospel movement, as it was described in various critical writings.

Keywords: Social Gospel, race, gender, social evil, Kingdom of God

1. Introduction

Western culture, especially the United States, managed to assess itself considering various evils that had developed within it. The evils reached both higher and lower classes. Evils such as injustice led to abuse, which affected mainly the working classes. Greed and injustice, therefore, led to alcoholism, abandonment, gambling, violence of all sorts,

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abuse, and poverty. Heavy and rapid urbanization, as well as industrialization, generated social tensions within various layers of society. The pressure mounted as large waves of immigrants reached the US, in the context of a country that was still dealing with the outcome of the Civil War, racial and gender issues. The churches either retreated to their inner lives or tried various outreach programmes that would address such evils and created a favourable context for the Kingdom of God. It was this context that generated the Social Gospel movement. It was an attempt to address social evils, from a theological and practical perspective. The movement was never centralized, with a structured leadership. This allowed for the movement to morph into various outreach programmes, but it also weakened it and led to its demise in the aftermath of World War I. At the height of its influence, the Social Gospel movement argued in favour of implementing Christian principles into social life in order to do away with evils such as injustice and abuse. The hope was to eliminate poverty and create a society in which all would thrive and prosper. Yet, the movement was limited by the culture in which it developed. Despite the positive impact of several of its projects, it also accounts for failures, especially in matters of gender and race. Such movements are to be studied thoroughly since they contain various elements that can offer at least some guidance to solving contemporary issues.

The paper is conceived as an introduction to the Social Gospel movement, highlighting its basic elements, the theology that it was built upon but also the contributions and the critiques it received. The paper also aims at presenting the legacy of the movement as well as the possible perspectives it offers for the current social context. It does not aim at analysing the writings of its leaders, yet it does touch on some of their influences on issues such as race and gender.

2. The Basics of the Social Gospel Movement

The Social Gospel movement grew out of the strife of practical social and economic issues as well as the need to define the essence and influence of the theological and practical concept of the *Kingdom of God*. The debate also probed whether the movement was liberal in its theology, and if so, to what extent it reached into the problematic realm of liberalism,

from the perspective of conservative theology. On the same note, the issue of how “social/socialist” the movement was, seemed to be just as important.² The movement was criticized by both sides of the economic spectrum, liberal and conservative. The movement ended up somewhere in the middle. The foundational principle of the Social Gospel movement was to apply Christian principles to social issues. It began as a reaction to what was considered the abuse of industrialization on the working class, beginning at the end of the 19th century and still having an influence in various groups not only in the United States but also throughout the world. The peak of the movement was before World War I, influencing various civil rights movements. The Social Gospel was also a civil rights movement, but it managed to apply a specific religious/theological message to such issues. Besides the social aspects, the religious ones were dealing with issues of sincere piety and the preparation for the coming of God’s Kingdom. The eschatological element was based not in personal³ piety alone but in the active involvement in social progress. Despite the mainly Protestant element that made up the movement, it was sufficiently diverse to include not only a Catholic element⁴ but various sympathizers, with varied backgrounds, ranging from pastors to businessmen and journalists.

The 19th century presented itself with various challenges in the urban areas, which sprang from the aftermath of the Civil War, the heavy immigration, especially from Europe, and a certain type of industrialization that affected the working class, but mainly in the northern part of the United States. The preoccupation of preaching, for example, was to enact the Kingdom on earth and to improve man’s condition.⁵ The main issues that were faced by the working class and the poor were alcoholism, a rise in crimes, racial tension, insufficient and ineffective education, deficient housing, and a lack of healthcare. It appears that some of the social ills were generated by the concentration of wealth among the industrialist capitalists, thus generating social unrest, which began a series of strikes in the late 19th century. The Christian response to the tensions appealed to the conflict between

² YEAGER, D. M. (1990): Focus on the Social Gospel: An Introduction. In: *The Journal of Religious Ethics*. 18, 1. 3–5.

³ *** (1912): The Social Gospel. In: *The Biblical World*. 40, 3. 147.

⁴ FANNIN, Coleman (2011): Social Gospel. In: Kurian, Geroge Thomas (ed.): *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470670606.wbecc1278>.

⁵ HAMILTON, Thomas (1942): Social Optimism and Pessimism in American Protestantism. In: *Public Opinion Quarterly*. 6, 2(Summer). 280.

capital and labour forces. The terms “Christian socialism” or “social Christianity”⁶ were used before what came to be known as “Social Gospel”. Some argued that socialist democracy, for example, would have a context-defined solution, based on cooperative and public ownership.⁷ The defining elements of the movement were the same, meaning that the principles of the Social Gospel had longer historical roots.⁸

The context in which the Social Gospel movement emerged is one of religious pessimism, especially in the Protestant camp, which came via the Puritan tradition. Since this tradition had Calvinist roots, it enforced a strong difference between the church and the world. It led to a retreat within the limits of the church environment because the vision was of an exemplary society, which, because of sin, could not be built. Christ would return when society had reached a critically low point in immorality and sinfulness. The Great Awakenings did little to move the greater mass of the Protestant population, even though it promoted a theology of conversion for both soul and society. On the same note, the impact of the Great Awakenings was different from the North to the South.⁹ The awakenings took place mostly on the frontiers of the colonies. Nevertheless, the abolition of slavery, education reforms, as well as temperance movements, were inspired by the awakenings, but in the North. In the South, the effect moved towards individualism, which refers to personal experience, with the side effect of separatism. The influence of theology is important in this context because the premillennialist view emphasized the imminent return of Christ, which prompted the believers not to be involved in social evils.¹⁰ The effect mutated into what was later called fundamentalism, which argued that Christian truth is found in propositional statements about Scripture. During the Civil War, all sides chose to justify their actions by using the Bible.

⁶ MOHN, Elizabeth (2017): Christian Socialism. In: *Salem Press Encyclopedia*. Salem Press. <http://0-search.ebscohost.com.wam.seals.ac.za/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ers&AN=87997717&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

⁷ DORRIEN, Gary J. (1989): Liberal Socialism and the Legacy of the Social Gospel. In: *CrossCurrents*. 39, 3. 347.

⁸ FANNIN 2011, 2.

⁹ STONE, Geoffrey R. (2009): The Second Great Awakening: A Christian Nation. In: *Georgia State University Law Review*. 26, 4. 1321.

¹⁰ WILLIAMS, Joyce E. – MACLEAN, Vicky M. (2012): In Search of the Kingdom: The Social Gospel, Settlement Sociology, and the Science of Reform in America’s Progressive Era. In: *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*. 48, 4(Fall). 340. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jhbs.21563>.

The problems amounted to its use in a populist fashion. However, as vocal as they might have been, the sides proved their inability to engage and solve the practical issues of society. There was no unifying force among the various sects and religious cults. The industrialization crisis generated the need for a communal response to the new social challenges. It is important to note that the initiative came from secular groups.¹¹

The social context is important for understanding the movement since the 19th-century United States were going through important economic and social changes, prompted by the heavy industrialization of the country. It led to rapid urbanization, but without implementing sanitary and healthcare systems that could provide help to the great number of new citizens. A similar situation took place, for example, during the English Industrial Revolution, when cities were filled with town folk and former peasants, farmers, who found themselves in a new context that was not merely as safe, sanitary, and protective as their rural environments. They were pushed into the new urbanization by the industrialization process, but the accommodations and the housing created the context for sickness, poverty, and death, especially among the young and the children.¹² They were sent to work in factories from an early age, and the conditions were anything but safe. The abuse was described, and measures were taken, gradually, to elaborate a plan that would safeguard workers and their families.¹³ It was then that the Anglican Church failed to address the issue of the new citizens in its entirety, but it was not a complete failure since the later known Methodist movement reacted to the issues presented by the new social, economic, and even religious conditions. Methodism¹⁴ rose from the social disasters that plagued the English working class. Abortion, alcoholism, family abandonment, violence, rape, poor health, and other such issues prompted John Wesley to get involved in the work of alerting society about them and try to solve at least parts of them. The legacy of the movement saw a drop in child labour activities throughout the world.¹⁵

¹¹ FANNIN 2011, 1.

¹² NARDINELLI, Clark (1980): Child Labor and the Factory Acts. In: *The Journal of Economic History*. 40, 4. 739–41.

¹³ KELLEY, Florence (1905): Child Labor Legislation and Enforcement in New England and the Middle States. In: *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 25. 66–76.

¹⁴ DREYER, Frederick (1986): A “Religious Society under Heaven”: John Wesley and the Identity of Methodism. In: *Journal of British Studies*. 25, 1(January). 79.

¹⁵ BASU, Kaushik (1999): Child Labor: Cause, Consequence, and Cure, with Remarks on International Labor Standards. In: *Journal of Economic Literature*. 37, 3(September). 1088–1089. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.37.3.1083>.

There are several recognizable achievements of the Social Gospel movement. The first is that it brought the concept and the need of social justice to light by making it a constitutive part of the identity of Christian faith, rather than a secondary element of it. The churches became conscious of the negative elements of their historical development. The discipline of Christian social ethics was developed and implemented in various forms.¹⁶ The movement also helped the individual Christian understand his or her social identity, which meant that a Christian is part of society and he or she has an impact within it. As an individual and as church, Christians acknowledged the reciprocal sharing in the social impact, since society and church exchange values as well as various negative principles. This means that the church and society cannot be completely separated. The church will operate within society, and society will have an impact on the church.¹⁷

The movement managed to have several deficiencies as well. Among these, the anthropomorphic element is perhaps the most visible. The movement's theology reduced the purpose of God to human purposes. The grandeur of God's personhood was oriented in accordance with human issues. It followed that the theological issue of sin was reduced in importance, transforming the perspectives on human abilities from practical to utopian and overly optimistic. The movement's proponents believed that humanity could overcome sin and conflict in ways that would lift humanity beyond its status. Social structures, bureaucratic systems, and governmental leadership were considered as the facilitators of genuine social change, which would usher in the Kingdom of God. These perspectives were deemed as naïve. From the perspective of conservative theology, the movement concept of God as identical with the world is the most problematic theological issue. This concept is related to the reduction of spiritual life to ethical life. The problem of reducing spirituality to the ethics is that it denies the complexity of the human spirit and the transcendental nature of God. By changing these theological precepts, the movement considered history as a linear universal human progress. The leaders of the movement considered humanity able to reach its full potential on its own.¹⁸ The American context apparently suffered from the same issue, and it led to poverty and abuse. However, the times were different, and this time the public took notice of

¹⁶ SHINN, Roger L. (1988): Christian Social Ethics in North America. In: *Ecumenical Review*. 40, 2(April). 226. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.1988.tb01535.x>.

¹⁷ YEAGER 1990, 5.

¹⁸ Ibid.

the injustice. The American society tried to address the social issues in various ways, one of which was Reform Darwinism.¹⁹ The promoters of this movement argued that the poor would not be able to handle direct charity. They tried to solve the issue by heavy investments in hospitals, libraries, universities, and other ways that would facilitate access to knowledge, healthcare, and a better future.²⁰

The Social Gospel movement, on the other hand, was inspired by the Progressive movement and Christian postmillennialism. In this sense, the leaders did not promote the destruction of industrialization but argued in favour of matching its force with positive social programmes. The purpose was to aid society and create the new social context for all to prosper. The fundamental issues of what most Social Gospel proponents desired were: equality in Christian brotherhood, based on a democratic polity; churches to accept people from all classes and not to be divided by status or wealth; support for education; liberty, equal rights, public order, political purity, and general progress.²¹ Social Darwinism seems to have thrived because the 19th-century industrialized society considered itself a reflection of the “tooth-and-claw” version of Darwin’s theory of natural selection. However, at an economic level, it seems that many in the business community did not share the tenets of Darwinism but rather those of classical economics or Christian morality. This issue is important because it highlights some of the common misconceptions regarding how society interpreted several key writings, in contradistinction to what those writings argued.²² Darwin’s theory of the survival of the fittest is one of them. The interpretation of his writings was much more widespread than what he wrote. It was the case of Malthus’s interpretation of Darwin’s writings that led to a series of measures that impacted the American society and to which the churches and the Social Gospel movement responded. The point was not to allow society to succumb to its own lusts and evils. The misinterpretation of Darwin’s laws of natural selection occurred

¹⁹ ROGERS, James Allen (1972): Darwinism and Social Darwinism. In: *Journal of the History of Ideas*. 33, 2. 261–62. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2708873>.

²⁰ MARTIN, Michelle E. (2012): Philosophical and Religious Influences on Social Welfare Policy in the United States: The Ongoing Effect of Reformed Theology and Social Darwinism on Attitudes toward the Poor and Social Welfare Policy and Practice. In: *Journal of Social Work*. 12, 1(January). 50–53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017310380088>.

²¹ JACOBS, Pierre (2015): The Social Gospel Movement Revisited: Consequences for the Church. In: *HTS Theological Studies*. 71, 3. 2–3. <https://doi.org/10.4102/HTS.V71I3.3022>.

²² HUTCHISON, William R. (1975): The Americanness of the Social Gospel; An Inquiry in Comparative History. In: *Church History*. 44, 3. 372. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3164037>.

because Social Darwinists selected the unnecessary concepts, rather than the essential ones.²³ The Social Gospel movement managed to argue that social evils can be alleviated, if not solved.

3. Theological Elements

The theological backbone of the Protestant lethargy before the Social Gospel movement was anchored in the Puritan doctrine of providence, coupled with Enlightenment philosophy and a class division specific to the Victorian age. The issue refers to the idea that God oversees all creation, but each individual believer must work for the glory of God, as seen manifest in their deeds. This issue was eventually turned into a principle of working for one's own self-interest, pursued to the point that as long as an individual does not break God's rules, no reproach was to be given. Therefore, various companies and political structures were allowed and accepted, especially in the context of accelerated industrialization.²⁴ The result was a systematic exploitation of the working class and the poor. This was coupled with the concept of Social Darwinism and the famous "survival of the fittest". These were all imbued into the social, economic, and political construct of democratic capitalism. The crisis was deepened by the new waves of immigrants from Catholic and Jewish European nations. The new migrants had come from famine and hardships, prompting the Protestant population to retreat from the inner cities. The Catholic Church picked up the task of dealing and caring for the migrants,²⁵ who added to the pressure of social unrest.²⁶

The initial separation between denominations turned into social projects of cooperation. The argument was that there was an obvious need for missions in the cities.²⁷ The idea of ecumenism, in the sense of denominational collaboration became more prevalent. Various congregations turned to evangelization, but it was combined with

²³ ROGERS 1972, 267, 280.

²⁴ DORN, Jacob H. (1983): *The Social Gospel and Socialism: A Comparison of the Thought of Francis Greenwood Peabody, Washington Gladden, and Walter Rauschenbusch*. In: *Church History*. 62, 1. 83. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3168417>.

²⁵ BLANKENSHIP, Anne M. (2020): *Just Immigration and the Social Gospel*. 64, <https://dspace2.creighton.edu/xmlui/handle/10504/126214>.

²⁶ FANNIN 2011, 2.

²⁷ GRAHAM, John Russell et al. (2007): *Spirituality and Social Work: Select Canadian Readings*. Canadian Scholars' Press. 66.

charity, offering social services, coupled with educational programmes and recreational events. The context evolved to the point where sociology, together with other new social sciences, was turned into the scientific arm of the movement.²⁸

In terms of its theology, the Social Gospel movement reflected the political, social, religious, and economic views that were trending in the US at the end of the 19th century. The movement rejected premillennialism, arguing in favour of postmillennialism. This argument was favoured because it relied on social harmony and social peace. For the second coming of Christ to occur, the people, the society at large was supposed to defeat social evil. The accent fell on the concept of a victorious humanity. The eschatological perspective fuelled an optimistic and progressive attitude towards morals and politics. The Social Gospel movement developed within Protestantism and tended to act beyond it, without exiting its structures. Therefore, Protestantism may have had a slow reaction to the ails of industrialization, but the Social Gospel tackled the issue. The movement became critical of several tenets of Protestantism, such as revivalism and eschatological views.²⁹ It did not reject in bulk any of the fundamentals, instead it managed to explore “new theologies”, which kept the centrality of Jesus Christ. An important element was the shift from the doctrine of the elect to that of the baptized. The issue resulted in a better understanding of equality and liberty. The American society, through the efforts of the Social Gospel movement, took aim at abolition and racism, although not all proponents agreed on such issues. The outreach of the movement influenced the similar issues of Europe.³⁰

Churches were at the heart of the social issues since the poor and the working class voiced their troubles also in the ecclesiastical system. The clergy saw the change from the agrarian society to the industrial one, but not a qualitative change in the lives of the workers. The issue was that there were fewer privileged compared to the masses of the destitute. The low quality of life pushed many into what could be described as sinful and destructive practices. In this context, the Social Gospel movement supported labour rights and government regulations on corporations. The church regained its role as a defender of the poor and the destitute.³¹ This move gave the church a legitimate role

²⁸ FANNIN 2011, 2.

²⁹ CURTIS, Susan (2001): *A Consuming Faith: The Social Gospel and Modern American Culture*. University of Missouri Press. 2.

³⁰ FANNIN 2011, 2.

³¹ JACKSON, Gregory S. (2006): “What Would Jesus Do?”: Practical Christianity, Social Gospel Realism, and the Homiletic Novel. In: *PMLA*. 121, 3. 647–48.

in society, while its evangelists put into action a plan for the reformation of education, healthcare, and sanitation. These efforts gained an eschatological side because the movement considered bringing the Kingdom of God into this world as a legitimate and efficient way to counteract and repair the injustices done by the industrial capitalism.³²

The Social Gospel movement seems to have three theological pillars. The first is the immanence of God, which presents Him as being active in creation, nature, and history. The God, who is at work, is to be joined by the Christians, with the purpose of creating relationships in accordance with God's love and devotion to His creation. The second pillar is the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God. This entails that God's divine care cannot be separated from His involvement and care for His creation. The creation includes the element of salvation, which entails a different kind of relationship within the church, but also outside of it. The church, through its members, creates new types of relationships with society at large,³³ and thus the church becomes a factor of social change. In this sense, the sacred and the secular overlap, but are not mingled. There is no more a sacred space, separated from the secular, which would lead to the separation of church and state, in its later forms. Instead, the sacred overlaps with the secular, and thus the interest of the church becomes the interest of society, and the issues of society become of interest for the church. The latter does not cancel society as a construct, but it actively engages what it deems to be its evils, taking the side of the oppressed. They would usually amount to the working class and the destitute as well as those individuals who are at the periphery of social morality. In this sense, the church does not abandon either its own or the destitute who do not belong to it. The third pillar is the Kingdom of God, which can be brought into the world once society has resolved and healed its wounds. However, society cannot be healed through itself because it is the one creating the evils. The solution comes from the involvement of God, through the church, which acts responsibly and in full accordance with the precepts and principles of the divine order.³⁴ From a conservative theological perspective, the main issue with the Social Gospel movement was its adherence to liberal theology. They considered God to be part of the social

³² FANNIN 2011, 3.

³³ BOWMAN, Matthew (2007): Sin, Spirituality, and Primitivism: The Theologies of the American Social Gospel, 1885–1917. In. *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*. 17, 1. 101–3. <https://doi.org/10.1525/rac.2007.17.1.95>.

³⁴ FANNIN 2011, 3.

process or that He was within it. The concept allowed for a critique of society,³⁵ especially at the economic and political level. It was their philosophical idealism that prompted the critique since, God being a part of the social structures, society cannot remain decadent or unjust. The change would come from within.³⁶

Although the Social Gospel movement influenced the Western culture of Europe, then, in time, reaching North and South America and taking on various shapes, it was predominantly a US phenomenon. The movement placed great faith in the concept and role of the “nation”, thus pushing for an agenda of social justice. As idealistic as it might have been, it was also pragmatic in its approach to social evils and injustice. The movement aimed at solving social problems, such as housing, education, and healthcare for the poor.³⁷ The concept was developed in England, but its peak development was in the USA. Yet again, it was the church that got involved, through the efforts of various clergymen. The movement also reached and got involved in the political realm of government policy. The Social Gospel promoters argued for abolition and passing a law of temperance, on vices such as alcohol consumption and gambling. These requests became legal through the 18th Amendment. A series of collaborations were set up, among others with the Women’s Temperance Union, which saw women become highly involved in the process of social change. The involvement of women, together with the outreach they provided, began a process of recognizing the value that women add to society at a much larger scale. As times passed, the feminist movement became much more prevalent, and it even gave an impetus for women’s right to vote.³⁸ An important achievement was the determination of Northern teachers and theologians to move back to the South with the intent purpose of educating free slaves. Some of these teachers were abolitionists and former members of churches in the southern regions. Reintegrating southerners into American society was met with resistance, mainly because their efforts included the message of repentance. The social divide still lingers, but efforts were made to limit the racial and social divide. The efforts were delivered through missionary societies, yet the message was partly reduced to the industrial growth.³⁹

³⁵ Latta, Maurice C. (1936): The Background for the Social Gospel in American Protestantism. In: *Church History* 5, 3. 263. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3160788>.

³⁶ FANNIN 2011, 4.

³⁷ MORGAN, J. Graham (1969): The Development of Sociology and the Social Gospel in America. In: *Sociological Analysis*. 30, 1. 46. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3709933>.

³⁸ FANNIN 2011, 5.

³⁹ Ibid.

The concept of the Social Gospel was not limited to the Protestant spectrum of the American religious environment. The Catholic Church became interested in the movement later.⁴⁰ Until that time, it focused on efforts to build hospitals, schools, and various institutions, which were engaged in social actions.

After the 1880s, at the encouragement of several leading clergymen,⁴¹ the Church got involved in economic issues such as the living wage. A plethora of important names, such as James Cardinal Gibbons, Archbishop John Ireland, Henry Edward Cardinal Manning of England, and Pope Leo XIII, argued in favour of labour associations and the promoting of government policies that would regulate business. The *Rerum Novarum*, of 1891, was a document that supported such ideas. It is important to note that at this stage the Catholic Church did not favour socialism but private property.⁴² Their efforts created another issue, namely that of the cultural integration of immigrants from Europe's Catholic nations. The issue turned into a condemnation of Americanism and the concept of religious freedom, by Pope Leo XIII, in 1899. This did not stop the Church to establish the National Catholic Welfare Council headed by John A. Ryan.⁴³

In the first decade of the 20th century, the Social Gospel movement's creed (the Social Creed of the Churches) was adopted in 1908 by the Federal Council of Churches. The main principles of the creed argued for the abolition of child labour, ensuring a living wage, and improved conditions for women. Because the movement understood the racial divide, in 1909, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was set up,⁴⁴ together with the Urban League. The First World War focused the attention of the organizations on peace and race. Throughout the war and in its aftermath, organized labour unions began to delineate themselves from their religious roots, renouncing the specifically Christian ideals. The war also diminished the optimism-in-the-fate ability of the human race to advance equality and harmony; thus,

⁴⁰ HARNISH, Brandon (1998): Jane Addams's Social Gospel Synthesis and the Catholic Response: Competing Views of Charity and Their Implications. In: *The Independent Review*. 16, 1. 95.

⁴¹ LUKER, Ralph E. (1998): *The Social Gospel in Black and White: American Racial Reform, 1885–1912*. Univ of North Carolina Press. 113.

⁴² KRIER MICH, Marvin L. (1998): *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*. Twenty-Third Publications. 46–47.

⁴³ FANNIN 2011, 5.

⁴⁴ EVANS, Christopher H. (2017): *The Social Gospel in American Religion: A History*. NYU Press. 93.

the movement lost its force. The movement's force waned also because it was not formerly organized, retaining a multifaceted, multinational, and multid denominational stance. The leaders of the movement were not always in a sustained dialogue, which made efforts ever harder to sustain. The term "Social Gospel" became broad enough to engulf characters who may not agree with being put in this category. The term does refer to a particular historical period, but it also places great emphasis on themes that were not new to Christianity. These themes were presented in precise context, in a precisely delineated historical frame. One of its main tenets was to take a new look at what evil⁴⁵ is and how it affects society at large. Therefore, it argued in favour of extending spirituality and engagement beyond personal piety, into society at large. It aimed at combating systemic evil, but with biblical principles, oftentimes implemented through the politically passed laws.⁴⁶

4. Contributions and Criticism of the Social Gospel Movement

The effects of the Social Gospel movement were seen especially in what the New Deal represented and most of the civil rights movements throughout the 20th century. After World War I and through the Great Depression, the Social Gospel began to face increasing criticism. It appears the movement was unable to generate long-term solutions for the problems it addressed. The movement became diffused in its later years, creating an issue for several groups that did not share the theological background. World War I and the Depression, fascism were also an elements that generated negative criticism for the movement. Criticism did not come only from the social and political realms but also from the theological realm because of the liberal theological influence of the movement.⁴⁷ Fundamentalism was the most powerful counterattack on the Social Gospel. Neo-orthodoxy and Christian realism also coalesced as voices against the fundamentals of Social Gospel. The lack of emphasis on personal sin and the optimism regarding the Kingdom of God, together with issues of divine judgement and suffering,

⁴⁵ WHITE, Ronald Cedric – HOWARD HOPKINS, Charles – COLEMAN BENNETT, John (1976): *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America*. Temple University Press. 9.

⁴⁶ FANNIN 2011, 5.

⁴⁷ NIXON, Justin Wroe (1942): The Status and Prospects of the Social Gospel. In: *The Journal of Religion*. 22, 4. 350.

labelled the movement as adherent to liberal theology. However, liberal theology and progressivism were not acceptable to the conservative middle class, which moved towards fundamentalism. The theological dynamics placed the movement within the bounds of social Christianity, which was neither conservative nor radical, but rather a mix of both currents. This placement favoured a reorientation of the movement towards the classical heritage of Christo-centrism and evangelicalism. In this context, the heritage of the Social Gospel movement translated into several modern issues such as gender and race, with their many facets and issues.⁴⁸

The impact of the Social Gospel created an influence which can be characterized by presentism. It works by reading present debates back into history, thus creating a tendency of dividing Christianity in the US by conservative/evangelical and liberal/Social Gospel groups. One of the results was the blame unjustly thrown on the Social Gospel movement,⁴⁹ by which it was responsible for the post-World War II decline of mainline denominations. Although it was considered that they lay at the origin of the movement, the validation of liberal theology's precepts and doctrines led to their discreditation.⁵⁰ Allowing naïve rationalism, triumphalism, promoting the Jesus of history instead of the Christ of faith, naturalizing the Kingdom of God, and emphasizing personal experience over the authority of the church led to the inevitable loss of mainline denominations.⁵¹ The first criticism led to the second one, which argued that Social Gospel contributed to the downplay of fundamentalism by creating an environment for progressivism. The Social Gospel movement was not a secular movement, even if some of its proponents were official socialists. Its connections to the evangelical background were not enough to ward off the criticism that claimed it renounced historical Christianity. Ethical culture and moral idealism were rather elements promoted by secular liberals, who even went against several of the Social Gospel's initiatives.⁵² The movement was engaged in missionary work, which could have easily resulted in social action because of the precepts the movement promoted at a pastoral level. Care for one's neighbour translated in defence against any oppressor and injustice. The Bible and the Kingdom of God were as real in preparing the

⁴⁸ FANNIN 2011, 6.

⁴⁹ DEICHMANN, Wendy J. (2015): The Social Gospel as a Grassroots Movement. In: *Church History*. 84, 1. 206.

⁵⁰ LATTI 1936, 268.

⁵¹ FANNIN 2011, 6.

⁵² MORGAN 1969, 46.

soul as they were in healing social evils. Society was the environment in which all Christians lived, wherefore it followed that it must be healed.⁵³

The Social Gospel grew out of a controversial situation, which was characterized by an evolving lack of influence within American Protestantism, marked by lack of theological consensus. Protestantism was losing ground before the Social Gospel movement appeared. It could be that the movement appeared because of the church's lack of influence.⁵⁴ The fundamentalist-modernist debate contributed to the new theological evolutions, the Social Gospel being such an evolutionary step. The issue with the context in which the movement appeared was the complexity of the theological debates. The very complexity, which had its positive aspects, shades the points of connection between the context in general and its ability to spawn new movements. The idea of a Christian nation and the restoration of the New Testament-like church was not abandoned. The 19th century proved that such endeavours were still valid actions, but the Civil War managed to bring to the fore new powers that were already shaping economics and politics. The new cultural and religious pluralism managed to lessen the influence of conservative theology. In the end, the Social Gospel movement was not in the extremes of the theological currents, but it swayed towards both.⁵⁵ If not for any other reason, the faithfulness that the movement showed towards eschatological expectations sheds light on the foundation of all its theoretical and practical developments.

One of the main issues with churches is the lack of social engagement. Within Protestantism, the lack of engagement with social issues is easily observable in everyday life. It is not the church, as the body of Christ, but individuals who chose to be engaged are the ones who change the context, but their reach and impact are limited. The churches tend to externalize their outreach and would rather pay for specialized services, including missions, but also social assistance, while most members remain focused on church attendance and small group meetings. From a political standpoint, the churches are engaged through their representatives in the structures organized and recognized by the government or through Christians who are also politicians. While the Social Gospel movement was developing, the erroneous perceptions about the movement were turned by churches into arguments for not getting involved in social contexts.⁵⁶

⁵³ FANNIN 2011, 6.

⁵⁴ EVANS 2017, 230.

⁵⁵ WHITE, Ronald Cedric (2002): *Liberty and Justice for All: Racial Reform and the Social Gospel (1877–1925)*. Westminster John Knox Press. xix.

⁵⁶ JACOBS 2015, 3.

Another element of criticisms was about segregation and the lack of interest in dealing with the issue for all African Americans. Justice equality was an issue, and the country was still divided on the matter of race. As mentioned, the movement managed to be taken up also in the African American community, but their influence was not highly influential in the mainstream movement. This criticism went together with gender issues, mainly because the movement was headed by mostly white males from the middle classes, who naturally reflected the biases of their context. The background aided the criticism that they were merely idealist bourgeois, whose reforms were superficial and revisionary instead of being structural and radical. Their outreach was limited by their inner convictions. This led to a reduced influence in society, a reason for which change did not occur. The movement's context and its foundations also created the premise for the movement's demise as soon as the context changed. In other words, the movement would not survive the context it was born into.⁵⁷

The years the movement was most active were between 1880 and 1920, a time which overlapped with the massive influx of migrants from Europe and the already mentioned heavy industrialization. Criticism aimed at some of the main issues presented in the theology of the movement. Because of the influence of liberal and progressive currents, it was argued that the movement presented sin as less important than presented in the Gospels. This meant that man was not as evil as presented in the Bible, whereas God was not so cruel and bent upon punishing sin and the sinners. Criticism also argued that the movement transformed the Gospel from the good news to cultural restoration. If social restoration takes place, it means the Gospel is fulfilled. The accent falls from personal salvation to social salvation. The movement was criticized in the decades following World War I for endorsing Victorian values, which included ignoring race issues, anti-feminism, and its issues with violence and coercion. Reducing the human being to one's emotional element is part of what liberal theology was charged of doing.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ LASH, Christopher (1990): Religious Contributions to Social Movements: Walter Rauschenbusch, the Social Gospel, and Its Critics. In: *Journal of Religious Ethics*. 18, 1. 16.

5. Perspectives of Social Development

The past remains a source of deep meaning for issues raging in contemporary times. However, the past becomes irrelevant if it is not critically assessed for the present context. The contemporary mind struggles with essentially the same problems as in the past. The context is different; therefore, decisions and consequences seem to be similar as in the past. In this context, issues of racism, classism, and sexism seem to linger despite great efforts to reduce and eliminate them in contemporary society. The Social Gospel promoters understood in part that these realities needed adjustment. The full force of their engagement was limited by their times understanding of such issues. When the concepts of the Social Gospel became popularized, they were picked up by black leaders. The white leaders did not consider that the ideas of the blacks were of equal value to theirs. The idea of the Kingdom, even if all-encompassing, was depicted in line with a white moral vision of what a community is.⁵⁹ On the issue of gender and the rights of women to vote, the views were in line with their times. Yet, some of them changed their perspective after the first decade of the 20th century. The times were changing, culture and traditions were reimagined, classes were reforming, and the gender gap was narrowing.⁶⁰ Even if the change was not complete, the mere fact that the Social Gospel leaders and promoters changed their personal views is a point worth mentioning since it lies at the centre of future social developments.

The movement can be best assessed when one looks past the most well-known leaders. The movement's development meant that more than just the most quoted writers had an impact. Despite the Protestant roots, the impact of the movement transcended onto Catholic ground. Even within Protestantism, the extent of collaborations is astounding, ranging from Congregational to Presbyterian, Anglican, and Methodist.⁶¹ There is an important element of ecumenicity, understood in terms of collaborations, rather than a renouncement of theological and denominational identity. The collaboration between women activists and the leaders of the movement, such as the example of Rauschenbusch and Vida Dutton Scudder, points the argument towards the theological and social flexibility it was gaining. It may be said that the Social Gospel was too close to socialist circles, understood as

⁵⁹ HINSON-HASTY, Elizabeth (2009): The Future of the Social Gospel. In: *Theology Today*. 66, 1(April): 68–69. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004057360906600106>.

⁶⁰ HINSON-HASTY 2009, 68.

⁶¹ EVANS 2017, 203.

communism; however, there were several denials of such claim. Arguing in favour of social justice, equality, and a cooperative commonwealth, as in the case of Scudder, does not make a movement necessarily prone to becoming communist. In this context, the feminist take on social change was that women were better suited for the cooperative leadership that was needed to bring about the social change. Such arguments paved the way for a greater presence and influence of women in the public sphere. The ministry of women, as Scudder argues, is to be more present in the redemptive acts of God since they are created in the image of God. On this note, the Social Gospel theology was important also because of the value provided by its promoters to spiritual practices. Any practice that separated the believer from society was irrelevant.⁶² The social Christian was to be part of the society he lived in, empowered by a mysticism and social passion. The latter two elements were to be taken together since one without the other was just as irrelevant as the practices that took the believer out from the midst of fellow men. The Christian life promoted by the Social Gospel leaders was a result of spirituality and activism. The church, therefore, has a mission in society, but the truest question is whether the church is able to understand its role within it.⁶³

6. Conclusions

The Social Gospel movement developed in a time of social and economic exploitation and injustice. This does not do justice to the rather complicated strings that led to the development of the movement. The leaders of the movement witnessed the injustice, evaluated the impact, and tried to devise solutions for the problems. The aim of the movement was to solve the social evils generated by injustice and greed, manifested mainly in poverty, alcoholism, lack of sanitary measures and healthcare. These issues were considered social evils, and the movement aimed at solving them by redefining the impact of the church in society. In order to do this, the gossellers promoted a premillennialist eschatology because it argued in favour of the imminent return of Christ. Such a view also prompted a different perspective on social development. They argued that if society solved the social issues, the Kingdom of God would be fulfilled. Also, the social evils would be

⁶² HINSON-HASTY 2009, 71.

⁶³ HAIGHT, Roger (1988): The Mission of the Church in the Theology of the Social Gospel. In: *Theological Studies*. 49, 3(September). 477, 497. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056398804900305>.

rooted out by the involvement of the government, which was seen as able to enforce morality and justice. This is the reason why social gospellers got into politics and managed to pass various laws that were in tune with their belief system. They tried to force temperance in the use of alcohol and gambling. Their perspective of society did not solve all evils since their cultural context limited their view. In this sense, issues related to gender and race remained unsolved. At that point in history, the gospellers managed to cross the divide in the issues, but never managed to deliver a solution. From this perspective, the movement was contextually limited and therefore left the definitive solutions for the generations to come. The two world wars limited the outreach of the Social Gospel, yet its tenets were filtered, criticized, some abandoned, while others were picked up and developed.

The paper deals with a general presentation of the movement, highlighting the main aspects of the Social Gospel movement, as they were presented in various critical and descriptive writings. It aimed at presenting the fundamental elements that constituted the Social Gospel movement, together with its theological perspectives. The paper also presented various critiques, contributions as well as the legacy of the Social Gospel movement. However, the paper did not aim at analysing the main writings of the movement since it only aimed at an introductory type of presentation.

The current context in Western civilization urges a reassessment of various historical, social, political, economic, and religious movements because the modern Western social development seems to revolve around the same issues that the Social Gospel movement addressed since its inception. Looking back at how our predecessors struggled with the issues may offer a better understanding of what possible solutions our generation can implement, provided a proper analysis of the context is done. The Social Gospel brings forth the constant need to tend for the weak, the destitute, the poor, the rejected, but only once the cause of their situation has been defined correctly. Some decisions will aim at alleviating the immediate dire situations of these groups of people, while other decisions would aim at the cause of these social issues. For the ecclesiastical context, the churches would have to rethink, if necessary, their stand in the matter of social outreach since the issues stem from within the society they are part of, and the members of the churches are not separated from the society where these evils take root and develop. Once such a stand is defined, the churches can become or remain elements of positive social change.

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