

THE SOCIAL GOSPEL

Notes by John H. Y Briggs

While the language of the 'Social Gospel' dates to the end of the nineteenth century, it was preceded by the older exploration of what a Christian Socialism might entail, an exercise mainly undertaken in Britain by Anglicans. R. Tudur Jones identifies Benjamin Parsons, the Chartist-sympathizing minister of the Independent Church in Ebley in Gloucestershire, as one of the earliest pioneers of 'The Social Gospel', with his claim that 'the *true Gospel* includes temporal and spiritual salvation. The King of kings is the Father of all, and he expects that we shall show our spiritual pre-eminence by attending to the physical, social, intellectual and religious emancipation of all his creatures, but especially of his poor children'.¹ Another programme which fed into a concern for a 'Social Gospel' was the emphasis on a 'Civic Gospel' or 'Municipal Socialism' in the government of the city of Birmingham, expounded and implemented by the less than orthodox George Dawson, but popularized by the orthodox and respected Congregationalist, R. W. Dale. Such concerns were also promoted by theological developments which began to emphasize the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man, more than election and substitutionary atonement. They were further endorsed by the revelation by Christian writers of the appalling conditions prevailing in the nation's slums, in an increasingly class-structured society, coupled as it was with the rise of organized labour. Thus, while the dictum that the Labour Party owed more to Methodism than Marx has enjoyed widespread consideration, Tudur Jones illustrated the links between Congregationalism and various workers' movements whether agricultural labourers or dockers or boot-makers, also telling the story of F. W. Crossley's attempt to show his solidarity with his Manchester workers by going himself to live in the slums.

Hugh Price Hughes, leading Methodist advocate of the new emphasis, argued against too individualistic a focus in the practice of evangelism, to the detriment of the promotion of 'the social welfare of the people'. Among Congregationalists, teaching on the Social Gospel became associated with modernist theology as espoused by R. J. Campbell, minister of the City Temple, London. In 1907 Campbell wrote both his provocative *The New Theology and Christianity and the Social Order*. For Campbell, the older theology's emphasis on the universal fall of man and the consequent need for blood-atonement was 'not only misleading but unethical'. With similar views, Campbell's friend and supporter, and most radical of Congregational social gospellers, Thomas Rhondda Williams, who occupied the chair of the Congregational Union in 1928-29, had earlier penned his volume on *The Social Gospel* in 1902. Thus there were a number of issues at stake – traditional soteriology, the accusation that

¹ R. Tudur Jones, *Congregationalism in England* (London: Independent Press, 1962), p. 210.

Nonconformity had been concerned with the individual to the exclusion of the corporate, and the nature of the church's mission in the contemporary world.

While Campbell's 'new theology' was widely condemned by senior Congregationalists, including A. M. Fairbairn and P. T. Forsyth, the wider agenda of 'The Social Gospel', even amid fears of secularizing the pulpit and the church, received much support from successive chairmen of the Congregational Union. Critics have been harsh: James Munson has suggested that the concern with reforming society resulted in a confusion in the church's message where the 'secular world' was incorporated into the Christian message. His overall judgment was that while Nonconformity did produce its extreme social gospellers, for whom the new evangelism required a new theology which displaced orthodox views of the atonement, a larger number saw their concern for social change as an out-working of an orthodox evangelicalism which did not supplant the historic obligation to invite individuals to undergo conversion.²

Whatever names were used, the influence was widespread. For example, one normally known for his commitment to evangelism and deepening spirituality, the Baptist pastor, F. B. Meyer, defended political action working 'for the betterment of the people', co-operating with the Congregationalist, J. B. Paton, in forming the Christian Union for Social Service in 1895 which established a farm colony for the unemployed. Two years earlier, another Baptist minister, John Clifford, had formed 'The Ministers' Union' to bring together ministers who felt that 'the Gospel has a Social message for today'. In 1894, with Clifford as its first president, this union became the Christian Socialist League and later the Christian Social Brotherhood. In 1889, the layman, T. W. Bushill, director of a box-making company in Coventry, and deacon of the Queen's Road Baptist Church, an advocate of profit-sharing and industrial partnership, who was to give evidence to a Royal Commission on Labour in 1892, addressed the Baptist Union Assembly on 'The relationship between employer and employed in the light of the Social Gospel'. That John Clifford also urged the Baptist Union to pursue the 'social gospel' at the same assembly, demonstrates early use of the term.

The fullest exposition of the Social Gospel is to be found in the work of a group of North American theologians, the most notable of whom was the Baptist, Walter Rauschenbusch. Before becoming a Professor of Church History, he had exercised a remarkable ministry in the slums of New York in the 'Hell's Kitchen' area, which persuaded him that the church had to find in the scriptures a message which spoke to the exploitation and destitution that the processes of industrialization had produced. In the Bible he found much relevant material in the denunciation by the prophets of the corruption of their day and in Jesus' own warnings about letting service of Mammon, which could be interpreted as living by the profit motive, motivate the way one lived one's life in the world, and in his

² James Munson, *The Nonconformist: In Search of a Lost Culture* (London: SPCK, 1991).

teachings about the coming of the kingdom. Rauschenbusch wrote a number of significant books such as *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907), *Prayers of the Social Awakening* (1910), *Christianizing the Social Order* (1912) and *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917). Rauschenbusch's work was known among the Nonconformists of England and Wales, though it served more as a confirmation of their own thought rather than a catalyst for it.

A progressive concern to implement the Social Gospel seemed to fit well with evolutionary theory. In so doing it was clearly post-millennial in emphasis and therefore provoked attacks from dispensationalists and conventional pre-millennialist writers. Emerging neo-orthodox thinkers were also critical of a movement which tended to seek specialist knowledge of the social problem and philanthropic engagement in solving it rather than the exposition of the scriptures and the proclamation of salvation. While many of its insights continued to be propounded throughout the twentieth century, the Social Gospel, in effect, appeared to ebb by the outbreak of the Second World War.