

Walter Rauschenbusch in Historical Perspective *

WALTER RAUSCHENBUSCH (1861-1918) is remembered today as the leading prophet of the social gospel in American Protestantism, a significant pioneer in the effort to relate Christian faith to the difficult socio-economic issues of modern industrial society. Reinhold Niebuhr has said that Rauschenbusch was "not only the real founder of social Christianity in this country but also its most brilliant and generally satisfying exponent to the present day."¹

Rauschenbusch was also a church historian. All during his years of fame as a social prophet he occupied the chair of church history at the Rochester Theological Seminary in New York State. He himself was deeply interested in American church history and contributed significantly to its interpretation as well as to its content. It is, therefore, not inappropriate to preface a treatment of his career with some attention to the present state of the study of the history of Christianity in the United States, a history in which his own place is secure.

The relatively young discipline of American church history has recently entered what may be described as a third stage. During the nineteenth century, most treatments of church history on the North American continent were denominationally conceived. The effort was to tell the story of a particular communion; when the overall story was attempted it was in general understood to be the putting of the particular histories side by side. The rich fruit of this approach was the multi-volume American Church History Series, planned by Philip Schaff and published in the closing years of the last century and the opening years of the present one.

In the early twentieth century a quite different approach was developed. Church history then was widely conceived to be a branch of general history; the methods and chronologies perfected in studying secular history were applied to church life. Rauschenbusch himself contributed to this way of dealing with the history of the church. It was later most fully exemplified in the work of William Warren Sweet at the University of Chicago.

We have recently entered a third stage in the interpretation of the history of Christianity in America. This approach is influenced not only by the impact of the ecumenical movement and the theological renaissance, but also by those trends in general historiographical thought which take serious note of the stance and predilections of the historian in his choice of subject and manner of

* This article is based on an address to the Baptist Historical Society, London, April 29th, 1963.

interpretation. This new stage has been marked by a burst of scholarly productivity; in less than half a decade the basic secondary literature of the discipline of American church history has been offered anew.² Though the period of American church history in which Rauschenbusch lived and worked is over, his place as a major figure in the history of American Christianity is secure.

Walter Rauschenbusch was born on October 4th, 1861, the seventh in a continuous line of clergymen and authors. Some of his forebears had been quite prominent in the Lutheran Church in Westphalia. His father, Karl August Rauschenbusch (1816-99), had come to the United States as a pietistic Lutheran missionary in 1846. In a few years, however, the elder Rauschenbusch was won to Baptist views and settled in Rochester where he taught in the German department of the Rochester Theological Seminary. Walter loved his native city; much of his life was spent in it, though his travels often carried him far. His first long trip began in his fourth year and lasted for four years. His mother returned to Germany for an extended visit, which meant that the boy began his regular schooling in the land of his ancestors, at Barmen. The visit was prolonged because of a delay in his father's plans for sabbatical leave; at last the family was reunited and the lad had some opportunity for travel with his father, who was undertaking research into Baptist and Anabaptist history.

The young man's religious training was along strict German Baptist lines, conservative and pietistic. At the age of seventeen he had a "conversion experience" which led to his being baptized on confession of faith. Reflecting on it later, Rauschenbusch remarked:

"Now, that religious experience was a very true one, although I have no doubt there was a great deal in it that was foolish, that I had to get away from, and that was untrue. And yet, such as it was, it was of everlasting value to me. It turned me permanently, and I thank God with all my heart for it. It was a tender, mysterious experience. It influenced my soul down to its depths. Yet, there was a great deal in it that was not really true."³

After ten years in Rochester, where he attended a private school and a free academy, Rauschenbusch returned again to Germany. He studied at the Evangelical Academy at Gütersloh. He mastered Latin, Greek, French, German and Hebrew at this time, and showed great interest in art and literature. It was during this period that he first resolved to enter the ministry. After further study at the University of Berlin, he returned to Rochester in 1883, completing his final year at the University of Rochester for the B.A. and undertaking simultaneously his first year at the Rochester Theological Seminary.

In the summer of 1884 he served a summer pastorate at a small

German Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. He proved to be an effective minister and found he loved the work. His own words best express the impact the experience made upon him: "It is now no longer my fond hope to be a learned theologian and write big books; I want to be a pastor, powerful with men, preaching to them Christ as the man in whom their affections and energies can find the satisfaction for which mankind is groaning. And if I ever do become anything but a pastor, you may believe that I have sunk to a lower ideal or that there was a very unmistakable call to duty in that direction."⁴ Graduating from the German department of the Rochester Seminary in 1885 and from the regular curriculum the next year, he volunteered for foreign missions, but his offer was refused because it was feared that he was too liberal in questions of Old Testament interpretation.

He went instead to another needy field, to a tough West Side section of New York city, to serve the Second German Church, on the edge of an area known as "Hell's Kitchen." Here he came face to face with the terrible effects of poverty, unemployment, malnutrition, disease, and crime on human life. He began to suspect that something was wrong with a socio-economic system that allowed such terrible wrongs to go unchecked. He came to the city at a time when Henry George, author of *Progress and Poverty* and exponent of the single tax, was running for mayor. "I owe," he said, "my first awakening to the world of social problems to the agitation of Henry George in 1886, and wish here to record my life-long debt to this single-minded apostle of a great truth."⁵ He began to participate in movements for social betterment. Thus his social concerns did not come from the Church; they were pressed on him "from the outside." As he himself stated it, his social emphasis ". . . came through personal contact with poverty, and when I saw how men toiled all their life long, hard, toilsome lives, and at the end had almost nothing to show for it; how strong men begged for work and could not get it in the hard times; how little children died—oh, the children's funerals! they gripped my heart—that was one of the things I always went away thinking about—why did the children have to die? . . . And in that way, gradually, social information and social passion came to me."⁶

Many of Rauschenbusch's Christian friends saw no connection between his social work and his church work. He himself, with his individualistic, pietistic background, wondered what the deeper connection was too. He set out to relate his Christian faith to his social passion in an intelligible way. "All this time my friends were urging me to give up this social work and devote myself to 'Christian work,'" he later reminisced. "Some of them felt grieved for me, but I knew the work was Christ's work and I went ahead, although I had to set myself against all that I had previously been

taught. I had to go back to the Bible to find out whether I or my friends were right. I had to revise my whole study of the Bible. . . . All my scientific studying of the Bible was undertaken to find a basis for the Christian teaching of a social gospel."⁷

Recognizing a need for time for study and travel in order to do this, he took a nine-months leave of absence from his pastorate in 1891. First he studied social conditions in England, examining such diverse things as Fabian socialist and Salvation Army efforts to deal with social ills. Then he went to Germany, where he focused on New Testament study. Here the idea of the Kingdom of God, an idea greatly emphasized in the work of Ritschl and Harnack and one destined to become the master thought of his life, struck him with new force. He later said :

"So Christ's conception of the Kingdom of God came to me as a new revelation. Here was the idea and purpose that had dominated the mind of the Master himself. All his teachings centre about it. His life was given to it. His death was suffered for it. When a man has once seen that in the Gospels, he can never unsee it again.

When the Kingdom of God dominated our landscape, the perspective of life shifted into a new alignment. I felt a new security in my social impulses. The spiritual authority of Jesus Christ would have been sufficient to offset the weight of all the doctors, and I now knew that I had history on my side. But in addition I found that this new conception of the purpose of Christianity was strangely satisfying. It responded to all the old and all the new elements of my religious life. The saving of the lost, the teaching of the young, the pastoral care of the poor and frail, the quickening of starved intellects, the study of the Bible, church union, political reform, the re-organization of the industrial system, international peace—it was all covered by the one aim of the Reign of God on earth."⁸

It is not too much to say that the rest of his life was devoted to expressing in word and deed the meaning of this new perspective.

In the spring of 1893 the pastor married Miss Pauline Rother. At first he wondered if he should take on the responsibilities of married life because of his deafness, but Mrs. Rauschenbusch proved to be a special help to him in this respect, often going to meetings with him and summing up speeches and conversations for him. They had five children. In these years, Rauschenbusch became well known in American Baptist life in several ways. He served as secretary of the Baptist Congress, a forum for discussion of religious affairs. He wrote for church journals and for Sunday school papers. With a group of fellow Baptists, he organized the Brotherhood of the Kingdom, a group pledged to work for the restoration of the

idea of the Kingdom of God in the thought of the church and its realization in the world. Meeting first in 1893, the Brotherhood met annually thereafter for some twenty years. It was a germinating fellowship which enriched the lives of those who participated in it.

In 1897 a call came to Rauschenbusch to return to Rochester to teach in the German department of the Rochester Theological Seminary. In this department college and seminary work was combined; his assignment was to teach New Testament interpretation, natural sciences, and civil government—to which he added zoology and English! After five years, he was moved to the regular faculty of the seminary as professor of church history. He proved to be a great classroom teacher of history. He had the gift of making the past live and of making persons long gone suddenly understandable, so his students reported. He did not write a great deal as a church historian, but his historical knowledge clearly informs his books on social themes.

Then, in 1907, came the event which made him famous. The teacher of theological students could not forget those parishioners whom he had left behind in the slums of the great city. So he wrote the book called *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, prefacing it with these words:

“I have written this book to discharge a debt. For eleven years I was pastor among the working people on the West Side of New York City. I shared their life as well as I then knew, and used up the early strength of my life in their service. In recent years my work has been turned into other channels, but I have never ceased to feel that I owe help to the plain people who were my friends. If this book in some far-off way helps to ease the pressure that bears them down and increases the forces that bear them up, I shall meet the Master of my life with better confidence.”⁹

It happened that he was due for a leave. He left the country in the spring of 1907, just as the book was coming off the presses. He expected that his book would be severely criticized; he feared that he might even lose his post. To his surprise, the reception of the book was highly favourable—it touched American life at a point of need, a point made sharper to many by the financial panic of 1907. The book ran through edition after edition. Rauschenbusch had reached the height of his powers by the time he wrote the book—he had been dealing with social issues in articles, sermons and speeches since 1887; he had mastered a clear, pungent style of writing and made telling use of similes. He had developed an imaginative, poetic, almost mystical touch that gave colour and life to what he wrote. So he returned from Europe early in 1908 to find himself famous. Flooded with lecture invitations, he proved to be a

good platform man; most of his later writings were first given from the rostrum. He was thrust into the position of serving as thought leader of the social gospels in American Protestantism, and filled that role with distinction. Yet he did not try to be merely popular; he retained always a prophetic stance. Once he said to a group of friends, "When I am asked to speak anywhere, I always ask myself, 'What is there that these people ought to hear *that they would least like to hear*,' and then speak on that!"¹⁰ Hence his addresses were usually timely, fresh, and often startling to his audiences.

His first book pulled him into the public discussion of social questions in a more practical way. He drew on the progressive and socialistic thought of his time in advocating such things as the socialization of the large-scale means of production and of natural resources, the extension of insurance plans to cover unemployment, old age, and illness, and the initiation of the graduated income tax. His second major book, *Christianizing the Social Order*, clearly illustrates this trend. He also shared somewhat in the semi-utopian sense of expectancy that inspired the progressives in the years just prior to the first World War. In this book he made the startling claim that in four of the five major areas of life (family, church, education, politics), certain constitutional changes had been made so that they could to some degree serve as part of the organism through which the spirit of Christ could do its work in humanity. One major area was left, as he saw it: business—the unregenerate section of the social order. He advocated Christianized economic democracy as the right course for his country.

A person who has read only *Christianizing the Social Order* could get quite a distorted idea of Rauschenbusch's main contribution, however, which always was to relate Christian faith and social concern. His last major book returned centrally to this theme. Asked to give the Taylor lectures at Yale in 1917, he spoke on the topic, "A Theology for the Social Gospel"; the lectures were published later that year and have recently been re-published. Though he insisted that he was not a theologian in any technical sense, he felt the need to undergird Christian social movements with relevant theology. In this final book, he discussed forcefully what he called "the superpersonal forces of evil," which together make a "kingdom of evil" against which the Kingdom of God must move. Here the American social gospel found its clearest theological statement.

The first World War brought great sadness to Rauschenbusch, both because it threatened his social hopes and because of his root-age in two cultures in conflict. In part because of his German ancestry and name, his popularity waned somewhat with the coming of war, especially when the United States entered the war in 1917. Before the conflict had ended, he died of cancer in Rochester, July 25th, 1918.

Interpreters of the life and work of this Christian social pioneer have not all emphasized the same things. Some of those who have discussed him, including some of his sharpest critics, have seen him primarily as a social thinker and leader. They suggest that the social concern came to dominate his life and to command his real interest and energy. If one approaches him primarily through such writings as his 1912 book, *Christianizing the Social Order*, a case can be made for this.

Other interpreters have emphasized that he was a liberal Christian, one who stood in the Ritschlian, Harnackian, "Kingdom of God" stream of Christian thought. W. A. Visser 't Hooft's early book, *The Background of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism* (Haarlem, 1928), criticized him as an exponent of liberal theology. One of Rauschenbusch's "minor" books (though it sold many copies), a study book published by the Association Press in 1916, *The Social Principles of Jesus*, illustrates clearly how deeply Rauschenbusch was grounded in the liberal movement, drawing heavily on its critical historical approach to Bible and church.

Yet no interpretation of Rauschenbusch can be adequate if it misses the fact that the centre of both Christian and social faith was for him the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, and that his own life was expended in the effort to relate Christian faith to social issues.¹¹ *Christianizing the Social Order* may have seemed to have emphasized the social and neglected the religious concerns, but at its conclusion the author exclaimed, "This is a religious book from beginning to end. Its sole concern is for the Kingdom of God and the salvation of men. But the Kingdom of God includes the economic life; for it means the progressive transformation of all human affairs by the thought and spirit of Christ."¹² There was a tendency for the American social gospel to move in a humanistic direction; in the 1920s this drift was very clear. Rauschenbusch became aware of this danger very early in his career; he wrote in 1892 that ". . . many of us, through ease of life and the exceeding pleasantness of this present world, are prone to sag down from evangelical religion to humanitarian morality, from spiritual fervour to altruistic earnestness."¹³ This tendency he avoided in his own life; his liberalism remained always an "evangelical" or "Christocentric" liberalism. Most of Rauschenbusch's writings have been mentioned, yet the one that may prove to have the longest life of all is a little work published in 1910, *For God and the People: Prayers of the Social Awakening*. Here the quality of the man's spirit and faith is revealed. In the preface of this memorable collection of his own prayers he wrote: "When men are in the presence of God, the best that is in them has a breathing space. Then, if ever, we feel the vanity and shamefulness of much that society calls proper and necessary. If we had more prayer in common on the sins of modern

society, there would be more social repentance and less angry resistance to the demands of justice and mercy." From his hospital bed, Rauschenbusch wrote these unforgettable words:

"My life has been physically very lonely and often beset by the consciousness of conservative antagonism. I have been upheld by the comforts of God. Jesus has been to me the inexhaustible source of fresh impulses, life and courage.

My life would seem an empty shell if my personal religion were left out of it. It has been my deepest satisfaction to get evidence now and then that I have been able to help men to a new spiritual birth. I have always regarded my public work as a form of evangelism, which called for a deeper repentance and a new experience of God's salvation."¹⁴

His liberalism was evangelical and not humanistic.

It is now fairly widely agreed that the American social gospel, with its progressive social and liberal theological perspectives, faded from the American scene in the later 1930s and in the 1940s, though the social Christian movement of which it was a phase lives on in other forms. Rauschenbusch continues not only to remain as the most distinctive figure of the earlier movement, but also to serve as an inspiration to Christians in the present to relate their Christian faith to the social crises of their time.

Dr. Sharpe's balanced evaluation of the various facets of Walter Rauschenbusch's fruitful career form a fitting tribute to the man:

"The public, of course, knew him as an authority on social problems, and was only incidentally aware that he was a professor of history in a theological seminary. But was he, in fact, a sociologist with an appreciation of history, or an historian with an appreciation of the social changes going on in his own times? The latter is a truer description. The social work was in some sort a deflection, developed at the call of conscience. In his own person, he was first of all a man of religion, and an evangelist at that. Secondarily, he was a student of history, passionately interested in it, not as an antiquarian might be interested, but as one who wanted to understand living men and their probable future destiny by knowing the long past through which they had come. The social question came in as a gale which blew him off his intended course. He could not ignore it. Neither could he ignore his religion and his history when he turned to the social question, and out of the combination of the three came his peculiar contribution. With the incomparable incentive which religious commitment gives, and with the intellectual sweep and perspective that historical comprehension gives, he brought to social questions exactly the elements their discussion usually lacks in the short-sighted clash of selfish economic interests."¹⁵

In part because he was at once a genuine Christian, a reflective student of history and a man passionately involved in the struggles of his time, Rauschenbusch can still speak to us today.

NOTES

¹ *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York and London, 1935), pref.

² E.g., cf. G. E. Olmstead, *History of Religion in the United States* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1960); W. S. Hudson, *American Protestantism* (Chicago, 1961); S. E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York and London, 1963); J. W. Smith and A. L. Jamison (eds.), *Religion in American Life* (4 vols.; Princeton, N.J., 1961-), esp. Vol. IV, by N. R. Burr, *A Critical Bibliography of Religion in America* (1961); E. S. Gaustad, *Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (New York and Evanston, 1962); H. S. Smith, R. T. Handy and L. A. Loetscher, *American Christianity: An Historical Interpretation with Representative Documents* (2 vols.; New York, 1960-63).

³ "The Kingdom of God," *Cleveland's Young Men*, XXVII (January 9th, 1913), p. 2.

⁴ Quoted by Rauschenbusch's biographer, D. R. Sharpe, *Walter Rauschenbusch* (New York, 1942), p. 54. The Rauschenbusch papers, which Sharpe used extensively, are now in the historical collection of the American Baptist Historical Society at the Colgate Rochester Divinity School, Rochester, N.Y.

⁵ *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York, 1912), p. 394.

⁶ *Cleveland's Young Men*, XXVII (January 9th, 1913), p. 2.

⁷ "The Genesis of 'Christianity and the Social Crisis'," *The Rochester Theological Seminary Bulletin: The Record* (Sixty-Ninth Year; November, 1918), pp. 51f. In a certain way, his intellectual search for the link between Christian and social faith was aided by the tragic handicap of deafness. Leaving a sick bed too soon in order to minister to others in 1888, he had a relapse which resulted in deafness. The friendly, even gregarious young pastor was thus to a large degree cut off from others, and became shy and sensitive. He did learn to read lips to some extent, and he carried a horn-shaped hearing aid. But his handicap did give him wider opportunity for reading and study, and heightened his powers of concentration.

⁸ *Christianizing the Social Order*, p. 93.

⁹ *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York, 1907), p. xv.

¹⁰ Sharpe, *Rauschenbusch*, p. 203.

¹¹ George Hammar's criticism of Visser 't Hooft's treatment of Rauschenbusch is to the point in this connection: "... Visser 't Hooft's criticism of Rauschenbusch as a liberal theologian cannot be dismissed as unjustified. The lack of Visser 't Hooft is only that he does not fully realize that Rauschenbusch's interest in social problems also has a deeper foundation than that which his liberal theology constitutes. At heart Rauschenbusch's social interest has its foundation in his personally profound Christianity." *Christian Realism in Contemporary American Theology* (Uppsala, 1940), p. 153, n. 10.

¹² p. 458.

¹³ *The Watchman*, November 24th, 1892.

¹⁴ Letter to Dr. L. G. Barnes, reprinted in Sharpe, *Rauschenbusch*, pp. 434f.

¹⁵ *Rauschenbusch*, pp. 178f.