

AN ENGLISHMAN LOOKS AT RAUSCHENBUSCH

On 4th October 1861 a boy was born to a German-American family in Rochester, New York. His name was Walter Rauschenbusch. His father, Karl August Rauschenbusch, a Baptist minister and a professor in the German department of the Rochester Theological Seminary, had come to America in 1846, where he had adopted Baptist views. Walter, like his father, was to be a Baptist minister and a professor at the Rochester Seminary. However, within his comparatively short life span (he died of cancer in his native Rochester on 25th July 1918, at the age of fifty-six), he made such an impact on American Protestantism, as to be reckoned one of the outstanding names of twentieth-century American Christianity.

Though not the only (or even the first) able exponent of what came to be known as the "Social Gospel", Walter Rauschenbusch was certainly one of the best known leaders of the movement. Reinhold Niebuhr has called him "the most brilliant and generally satisfying exponent" of Social Christianity.¹ By his writing, preaching and his numerous platform utterances Rauschenbusch exerted an influence which was not confined to America or to his own generation. Martin Luther King Jnr., for instance, in 1960, paid tribute to his deep personal debt to Rauschenbusch, particularly to *Christianity and the Social Crisis* which, he said, "left an indelible imprint on my thinking".²

To understand Rauschenbusch's place within and contribution to the Social Gospel Movement, it is important not only to be familiar with his writings but to know something of the man himself. As Fosdick has said, "Rauschenbusch's writings cannot be well understood without understanding Rauschenbusch. What put his message over was in large measure the man himself".³ In this respect, the personal reminiscences of Dores Sharpe, Fosdick and Edwin Dahlberg constitute a valuable source for the student of Rauschenbusch as more academic assessments and specialist studies of aspects of his life and thought.⁴ Fosdick might well have added the need for an understanding of the America in which Rauschenbusch grew up, for it is only against this twofold background that a balanced assessment of his "Social Gospel" becomes possible.

The years between the Civil War and the close of the century were years of tremendous social and technological change and especially of rapid urbanization. Sweet has described the growth of the American cities as "one of the marvels of the eighties".⁵ They became "great sprawling congeries of human beings, formless and irrational but intensely alive and bursting with hopefulness". For the so-called middle-classes, it was a time of prosperity, but for the less fortunate there was poverty, unemployment, injustice, misery and corruption. It is small wonder that there was widespread discontent and unrest among the working classes or that working people began to organise themselves. The Knights of Labor, founded in

1869, had over half a million members by 1886.

Great changes were also taking place in the realm of ideas, best exemplified by the Darwinian revolution. Biblical scholarship and theology, no less than other disciplines, were subjected to critical scrutiny. In Europe, a modern scientific approach to biblical and theological studies was being worked out by scholars such as Ritschl and Harnack, and presented in American dress by Horace Bushnell (1802-1876). These changes, technological, social, industrial and intellectual, constituted the background to Rauschenbusch's life and work, and had a direct bearing on his career.

His entire childhood was not spent in America. When he was barely three-and-a-half his mother took him and his two sisters on a prolonged visit to Germany, lasting from June 1865 till August 1869. From all accounts, Rauschenbusch was a normal, bright, healthy, mischievous boy, with an independent judgement. On one occasion his father threatened to expel him from Sunday School because he had his own ideas on religious matters. He spent some happy summers on a farm in Pennsylvania, but work on a farm in New York, where the hours were long and the pay a mere pittance, left a lasting impression on him. His homelife was not happy; his parents did not get on well together and his father was given to heavy drinking - a factor in Walter's lifelong opposition to alcohol. The highlight of these early years was his conversion experience at the age of seventeen, followed by his baptism as a believer. Later he commented: "It was of everlasting value to me ... It was a tender, mysterious experience. It influenced my soul down to its depths", adding "yet, there was a great deal in it that was not really true".⁶

In 1879 he went again to Germany, studying first at the Gymnasium at Gütessloh and then at the University of Berlin. He also visited Leipzig, Frankfurt, Heidelberg and Basel, not confining his attention to books but taking an interest in art and culture generally. He mastered Greek, Latin, French, German and Hebrew and wrote letters home in Latin and Greek. He also found time for a month's visit to England, where he spent time in London, Oxford and Liverpool. Returning to the United States in 1883, he continued his studies at Rochester, both at the Theological Seminary and at the University, with the ministry in mind. Three events at the end of his student days were of special significance: first, his experience of the challenge of pastoral work during a student pastorate at Louisville, in the summer of 1884, which gave him the determination to forsake the academic world and become a minister; secondly, his resolution of the same year "to live literally by the teachings and spirit of Jesus"; and thirdly, a decision of the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society: though he had volunteered for service in India, the Society advised him to spend a few more years in the home ministry first.

Rauschenbusch was the minister of one church only, the Second German Baptist Church, New York, in a slum district appropriately known as "Hell's Kitchen", where he served from

June 1886 till 1897. Towards the end of his pastorate he married and in 1897 went to Rochester Theological Seminary, first as a teacher in the German department, and then in 1902 as Professor of Church History. But it was Rauschenbusch's experience as a minister in Hell's Kitchen which had the deepest significance in his maturing and emergence as the champion of Social Christianity.

From the beginning of his pastorate Rauschenbusch encountered at first hand the evils of a city slum - the poverty, injustice and misery. He was a careful observer of facts. He later told a class of students how many times a mother in one of the tenements had to lift her baby carriage up a curb before she could find a square yard of grass for her child to play upon. Fosdick, in recounting this anecdote, adds, "He had counted them. He knew in detail the plight of human lives, and he cared".⁷ Again, he visited a state prison for juvenile offenders and a seaside resort to see how people lived.

He soon began to grapple with the implications of the situation he found in New York. From Professor Harrison E. Webster of Rochester he had gained what he called "a love for punctilious honesty in intellectual matters and an interest in social matters". It was Webster who first directed his attention to Henry George.⁸ George, who maintained that the state should appropriate the "unearned increment" on the value of land by imposing a "single tax", and whose views are set out in *Progress and Poverty*, was standing as mayoral candidate in 1886. Rauschenbusch gave him his support and said later "I owe my first awakening to the world of social problems to the agitation of Henry George in 1886".

It was not long before Rauschenbusch was in demand both as a platform speaker and as a writer for the religious and secular press. He had a clear style and his vivid illustrations taken from everyday life skilfully drove home the lessons he wanted to get across. Together with J. E. Raymond, Elizabeth Post and Leighton Williams he started and edited for a short time a paper for working people, *For the Right* (1889). Theologically, a shift in his emphasis may be noted. Whereas previously his reading contained a substantial diet of writers such as Alexander McLaren, Hudson Taylor, and Henry Drummond, names like Mazzini, Richard Ely, Theodore Roosevelt, David Lloyd George, and Phillips Brooks began to figure more prominently. He was nevertheless deeply concerned about evangelism; he had a strong regard for D. L. Moody and he translated a number of Sankey's hymns into German. It was the more painful for him, therefore, to find his Christian concern about social problems and their solution regarded by the general run of orthodox Christians of all denominations as having nothing to do with the Gospel. To them, not only was the economic and political status quo divinely ordered, but the Gospel was concerned exclusively with the salvation of the individual.

The tension between the dominant Protestant orthodoxy and what Rauschenbusch felt to be a genuinely Christian concern gave him much heartsearching. It was only resolved when he

found in the concept of the Kingdom of God a unifying principle harmonising the New Testament Gospel and Social Christianity. Already in 1887, he had abandoned the generally accepted understanding of faith as "considering as true" for that of "confidence one person has in another".⁹ The following year, as the result of leaving his sick bed too soon, he was afflicted with almost total deafness, which led him to concentrate his energies more on reading, writing and theological reflection. In 1891 he spent nine months study-leave in Europe. In England he met Sydney and Beatrice Webb and spent some time studying the various co-operative experiments and the social work of the Salvation Army. In Germany he exposed himself to the liberal biblical scholarship associated especially with the names of Ritschl and Harnack. It was at this time that the Kingdom of God came to him as a "new revelation" and a "conquering idea". "Here", he wrote, "was the idea and purpose that had dominated the mind of the Master himself". "The Kingdom of God is the first and most essential dogma of the Christian faith, it is also the lost social ideal of Christendom".¹⁰

Returning home he sought to give urgent expression to the new truth he had discovered. In 1893, with Nathaniel Schmidt, Leighton Williams, W. N. Clarke, and a few other Baptist ministers, he formed a Brotherhood of the Kingdom, "for the better understanding of the idea of the Kingdom of God". The Brotherhood placed a special emphasis on the "social aims of Christianity" and endeavoured "to infuse the religious spirit into the efforts for social amelioration". The 1897 coal strike broke out while the Brotherhood was in session, and a note of "sympathy" was sent. In 1903 the group adopted twenty theses, drafted by Rauschenbusch, expressing support for the working classes in their fight for a living wage, and setting out what in general would today be called a mildly socialist programme, but which then must have seemed revolutionary. Needless to say, Rauschenbusch's war on social injustice and his demand for better conditions and a living wage for working people went against the grain in certain orthodox Protestant circles. For instance, in 1890 E. Anschütz, taking issue with him in *Der Sendbote*, the journal of the German-American Baptist community, argued that the real cause of the social problems of the day was a character deficiency in the dissatisfied lower classes rather than a deficiency in social conditions.¹¹

Rauschenbusch's own understanding of the Social Gospel and its implications was set out in his writings, principally *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907), written to discharge a debt to the people in Hell's Kitchen; *Christianizing the Social Order* (1912); and *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, the 1917 Taylor lectures at Yale. Besides these there were several smaller volumes and numerous speeches, articles and sermons both in English and German. Of the smaller works two in particular deserve note. *For God and the People: Prayers of the Social Awakening* (1910) in a delightful way provides an insight into the spiritual calibre of the man which is seldom noticed in academic appraisals. The second, perhaps the most widely circulated of Rauschenbusch's books, *The Social Principles of*

Jesus (1916) is a small handbook for college and other study groups, with Bible passages, daily comments, major expositions of weekly themes and practical questions concerning everyday life aimed at provoking thought and discussion.

Christianity and the Social Crisis was recognised by its author as "a dangerous book". It combines incisiveness of style, vividness of illustration, and above all a spiritual insight and passion reminiscent of the Old Testament prophets. It is easy to understand why it sold over 50,000 copies. In this as in all his writings, his vast and detailed knowledge of Church History, current events, and human nature shows on every page. Equally clear is the spirit of Jesus which pervades the book. He saw the social crisis of his day as the "overshadowing problem" of his generation.¹² Beginning with the Old Testament prophets' conviction that "God demands righteousness and demands nothing but righteousness", he went on to trace the social aims of Jesus. These too, are essentially ethical and social, and have their centre of gravity in the Lord's teaching about the Kingdom of God. "The essential purpose of Christianity was to transform human society into the Kingdom of God by regenerating all human relations and reconstituting them in accordance with the will of God".¹³ Various hindrances through the centuries, including other-worldliness, dogma, asceticism, sacramentalism and ecclesiasticism have prevented the Church from reconstructing society according to the will of God. Now, however, such barriers were down, and nothing need stand in the way of establishing the Kingdom on earth.

Like the earlier book, *Christianizing the Social Order* was written under a sense of strong inner compulsion. Rauschenbusch himself said that when he published *Christianity and the Social Crisis* in 1907, he thought he had said all that God wanted him to say. Now once more, five years later, he had a word for his generation. Sharpe considered that the sequel was "the most profound" of Rauschenbusch's writings, "the crystallized deposit" of his thinking on social problems and "the most complete and systematic exposition of his position".¹⁴ Basically, the argument is that whereas some areas of human life (such as the family, the Church, education and politics) have already been "christianized" or "moralized", the area of our economic life is not Christian. The principle of free competition, so beloved of Rauschenbusch's generation, he considered to have broad immoral effects, since as he had already pointed out in *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, "in competition the most ruthless man sets the pace".¹⁵ Capitalism, though efficient, is ruthless and "fundamentally indifferent to human life". Profit (i.e. "unearned profit") is "dishonest" in that it is stolen either from the workers (by withholding a fair wage in return for labour), from the consumers (by adulterating goods and misleading advertising), from investors (by watered stock), from the community (by loading on the community expenses which industry should bear, e.g. care of the aged, counteracting the pollution of air and water by smoke and waste), or from the public at large (by tariff). The

unearned increment on land values is singled out for special mention, and the public ownership of mines, oil and natural-gas wells (which are seen as specialized forms of land) is advocated. The fundamental demands of a Christian economic order are: justice, collective property rights, democracy, approximate equality and co-operation.

The same theme was expounded in even greater detail in various speeches and articles. Rauschenbusch called for such reforms as the appropriation of economic rent by the taxation of ground values (apart from improvements); the municipal ownership of natural monopolies e.g. water, gas, electric light and power, and roads; control of the express and telegraph business through the post office; the extension of education, libraries, museums, parks, playgrounds and baths; the introduction of a steeply graduated inheritance tax; the organization of trades, and labour legislation to improve the hours and conditions of workers, restricting female labour and abolishing child labour entirely. In outlook, Rauschenbusch was essentially a socialist, though he was careful to repudiate doctrinaire Marxism which he called "dogmatic" socialism. His was rather a "practical" socialism arising from a Christian concern for his fellows.¹⁶ Rauschenbusch is at his strongest when he is relating the ethical demands of the Gospel to modern life. A vigorous, manly style backed by an encyclopaedic knowledge of church history and powered by tremendous moral and spiritual insight account for the impact of his message.

He disclaimed the description "theologian" and certainly his last major work *A Theology for the Social Gospel* is, for me, the least convincing and satisfying of the three. This, perhaps, is not surprising since his theological perspective was that of the first rather than the third quarter of the twentieth century. What it provided was not a theological basis for the Social Gospel, but rather a reinterpretation of Christian theology in terms of the Social Gospel. The starting point and centre of gravity of Rauschenbusch's theological thinking was his insight about the Kingdom of God, "the energy of God realizing itself in human life".¹⁷ This is evident in *A Theology for the Social Gospel*. He himself regarded his theology not as essentially different from the Church's inherited faith, but as enlarging, intensifying and so transforming it. In the old faith, the message of the Kingdom had become obscured by excessive individualism. The book covers the whole range of Christian doctrine - God, the Holy Spirit, the Church and Sacraments, the Atonement and Eschatology. Some parts (e.g. the section on Eschatology) are highly speculative, and he shares with other liberals of his generation too shallow and impatient a view of the Church and Sacraments. Throughout, there are moral insights. For instance, he reminded his readers that sin is not a private transaction between the sinner and God, and that sin only becomes guilt in the full sense to the degree in which intelligence and will enter. Sin is seen primarily as selfishness, and salvation as a turning from self to God and humanity. A religious experience, Rauschenbusch maintained, is not Christian unless it binds us closer to men and commits us more deeply to the

Kingdom of God. He rejected a penal interpretation of the Atonement, and also any idea of a demonic or satanic Kingdom. The traditional Calvinist concepts of imputation and original sin had no place in his scheme of things. He did, nevertheless, recognise the existence, importance and power of super-personal forces of evil in the community, and the "solidarity of men in their natural groups bearing the yoke of evil and suffering". This he called the Kingdom of Evil.¹⁸ "When the social group is evil", he declared, "evil is over all".

The weaknesses of Rauschenbusch's theology have been frequently pointed out - his over-optimism concerning the inevitability of progress, and the possibility of building the Kingdom of God on earth, his failure to appreciate the extent of human frailty and sin, his shallow understanding of the Church and the Sacraments. These very weaknesses, in fact, are significant pointers to his real place in and contribution to twentieth century Christianity. He was above all a prophet, speaking out in the name of God against evil and injustice. He had all the marks of a prophet - contempt for priestcraft and impatience with ecclesiastical dogma, and above all a deep compassion for those who were oppressed by their fellows. Nor was his message a negative one. He had a compelling vision of what the reign of God means in terms of modern life. Like the Old Testament prophets his message sprang from his faith. Dahlberg calls him "the most Christ-like man I ever knew",¹⁹ and Sharpe wrote, "No one can fully understand him until he realizes that he was first of all a disciple of Jesus".²⁰

He was a prophet, and spoke to his generation. We must not be surprised, therefore, if his central theme so dominated his thinking that, at times, he appears to have got things out of proportion. Nor must we be surprised that some things in his message are dated. Anyone who is going to make an impression on his generation will not only react against his age but must, to some extent, also be a child of his age. The early years of the twentieth century, before the First World War, were an "Age of Crusades",²¹ a period of progress, and confidence in the essential goodness of man and the inevitability of progress still seemed strong. In the world of theology Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, though published in German a year before Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis* had hardly begun to disturb the liberal certainty that the Jesus of History could be discovered.

Moreover, among Christians who took their faith seriously and sought to relate it to the age in which they lived there was a readiness to hear the things Rauschenbusch was saying. As Professor Handy has said, and the researches of Professor Hutchison have more recently confirmed, the American Protestant emphasis on "Social Christianity" was part of a developing world-wide interest.²² In the United States, Josiah Strong (1847-1916), Washington Gladden (1836-1918), Richard T. Ely (1854-1943) and others preached the Social Gospel before Rauschenbusch. But it was the voice and pen of Rauschenbusch which propagated the Social Gospel most widely.

What specifically was his personal contribution to the Social Gospel movement? Probably the conviction that the real test of a religion is its unity within itself and with the whole of knowledge and experience. Speaking in 1913 he recalled that as a young man he had personal religion and a large social outlook but lacked a really complete faith which would cover the whole of life.²³ It was the quest for such a faith which led him, via Ritschl and liberal theology, to his concept of the Kingdom of God. In other words, Rauschenbusch's interpretation of the Social Gospel sprang out of the belief that the Gospel must and does relate to every aspect of life.

Whether it is possible to measure his achievement in terms of success and failure is doubtful. That he exerted a powerful influence on individuals and groups in his own day is beyond question. Through his writings and his classroom work that influence was extended to the next generation of leaders and ministers. The Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, founded in 1908, has been described as "the lengthened shadow of Walter Rauschenbusch". The document adopted at its inaugural meeting in Philadelphia has been called "an historic milepost in the growth of the social consciousness of co-operative Protestantism".²⁴ It includes the section widely known as the "social creed of the churches". Again, in our own day, with an increasing interest in what is being described as Political Theology, Rauschenbusch is being read with fresh interest. On the other hand, it has to be confessed that both in his day and in ours large sections of main stream Protestantism have been characterized by strong resistance to the social implications of the Gospel and an unyielding individualism. Perhaps the fact that each generation since the beginning of the century has, in some new form, raised the very issues to which Rauschenbusch called attention, means that we, too, must take his prophetic message seriously.

NOTES

- 1 Robert T. Handy, *The Social Gospel in America, 1870-1920*, (New York, 1966), p.253, cited from preface of Niebuhr's *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, (New York, 1935).
- 2 Handy, p.259, cited from article "Pilgrimage to Non Violence", *The Christian Century*, LXXVII (April 13th, 1960), p.439. *The Social Gospel in America*, in the Library of Protestant Thought series, provides an introduction to three Social Gospel leaders - Washington Gladden (1836-1918), Richard T. Ely (1854-1943) and Rauschenbusch, together with a selection of their writings. The substance of Professor Handy's address to the Baptist Historical Society, in 1963, on "Rauschenbusch in Historical Perspective" is printed in the *Baptist Quarterly* XX (1964), pp.313-21.
- 3 Introduction to *A Rauschenbusch Reader: The Kingdom of God and the Social Gospel*, ed. Benson Y. Landis (New York, 1957).
- 4 Dores Robinson Sharpe, one of Rauschenbusch's students, became his confidential secretary. He published a biography, *Walter Rauschenbusch*,

- (New York, 1942). Dahlberg, also a student of Rauschenbusch, provided his recollections of his teacher in "Edwin Dahlberg in Conversation: Memories of Walter Rauschenbusch", transcribed by John E. Skoglund, in *Foundations*, XVIII (1975).
- 5 W. W. Sweet, *The Story of Religion in America*, rev. edn. (1950).
 - 6 In an address on "The Kingdom of God", in 1913. The text is given in Handy, *Social Gospel in America*, pp.264-7.
 - 7 In introduction to Dores R. Sharpe, *Walter Rauschenbusch*.
 - 8 For an account of George's life see *The Life of Henry George*, by his son, Henry George Jnr. (1900), also Arthur Birnie, *Single-Tax George*, (1939).
 - 9 K. J. Jaehn, "The Formation of Walter Rauschenbusch's Social Consciousness as Reflected in his Early Life and Writings", (part 1), *Foundations*, XVI (1973).
 - 10 *Christianizing the Social Order*, (New York, 1912), p.93.
 - 11 Jaehn, *art.cit.*
 - 12 *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, (New York, 1907), p.xi.
 - 13 *Ibid.*, p.xiii.
 - 14 Sharpe, p.286.
 - 15 *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, p.360.
 - 16 See Rauschenbusch's "Dogmatic and Practical Socialism" (1901), printed in Handy, pp.308-22.
 - 17 *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, (New York, 1917), pp.140-1.
 - 18 *Ibid.*, pp.77-94 (for Rauschenbusch's teaching on the Kingdom of Evil).
 - 19 *Art. cit.* in n.4 above.
 - 20 Sharpe, p.424.
 - 21 Handy, p.3.
 - 22 *Ibid.*, p.4; W. R. Hutchison, "The Americanness of the Social Gospel; An Inquiry in Comparative History", *Church History*, (1975), pp.367-81.
 - 23 Sharpe, pp.221-2.
 - 24 H. Shelton Smith, R. T. Handy and L. A. Loetscher, *American Christianity*, vol.2, 1820-1960 (New York, 1963), p.394.