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Evangelical Social and Political Ethics: An Historical Perspective

One of the by-products of the recent evangelical rediscovery of the social dimensions of the gospel has been a renewed interest in nineteenth-century evangelical social reform.¹ Contemporary evangelicals have appealed confidently to the example of their nineteenth-century forebears to support their contention that the evangelical tradition was originally unafraid to expose the purity of the gospel to the reality of participation in movements of protest and reform. Wilberforce and Shaftesbury are remembered as the outstanding representatives of a biblical Christianity which was prepared to challenge the massive institutional evil of the Atlantic slave trade or the English factory system. Reference is made to works such as Kathleen Heasman's *Evangelicals in Action* (1962) to emphasize the great diversity in the objects of evangelical social reform and the multiplicity of the voluntary organizations which were dedicated to meeting human need in the name of Christ. To a large extent, this tradition of evangelical social action was an Anglo-American one: although evangelicals in the southern States condoned slavery, Protestant biblicism provided the main dynamic behind the anti-slavery movement in North America as it had done earlier in Britain.

It is against this nineteenth-century background that contemporary evangelicals speak with shame and regret of 'the great reversal' which saw evangelical Christians withdraw from social and political concerns in the early years of the twentieth century. The phrase 'the great reversal' is most widely associated with the book of that title by David O. Moberg, whose British edition was published by Scripture Union in 1973. Moberg had borrowed the phrase from the Church of the Nazarene historian, Timothy L. Smith, whose book *Revivalism and Social Reform* (1957) has been of seminal importance in indicating the connection between

¹ This paper is indebted to the work of Dr. D. W. Bebbington, who read an early draft. The responsibility for the views herein, expressed is entirely my own.

evangelical Protestantism and the reforming impulse in nineteenth-century America.² 'The great reversal' is generally explained as a casualty of the metamorphosis of nineteenth-century evangelicalism into twentieth-century fundamentalism: it was a reaction to the increasing identification of social Christianity with the theological liberalism of the social gospel movement, a reflection of the other-worldly preoccupations induced by the growing influence of premillennialism, and a product of the diversion of evangelical energies into negative campaigns against Darwinism and higher criticism.³

All received interpretations of history tempt the professional historian to engage in enthusiastic debunking, and there may be elements of debunking in this paper. But its primary purpose is not to disillusion us about our forebears. This paper has three main objectives:

1. To clarify the nature and limits of the nineteenth-century tradition of evangelical social reform.
2. To investigate more closely the relationship between that tradition and the rise of the 'social gospel' movement.
3. To suggest that there are certain parallels between this earlier 'social gospel' movement and the current 'Kingdom' school of radical evangelicals, which ought to be perceived and reflected upon by all parties in the current evangelical debate over social ethics.

The analysis of nineteenth-century evangelical social concern in both Britain and America must begin with the anti-slavery movement. Anti-slavery was the *cause célèbre* of the evangelical conscience, and the language and methods of the anti-slavery campaigns were carried over into campaigns against other social and moral wrongs. Anti-slavery sentiment in the age of Wilberforce was not confined to evangelical Christians, for its deepest roots lay in the sense inculcated by the new Enlightenment philosophy that all mankind was one, with a natural right to liberty and happiness. Evangelicals were, however, peculiarly active in their

² David O. Moberg, *The Great Reversal* (British edn., London, 1973), 11. A new edition of Smith's *Revivalism and Social Reform* was published by the Johns Hopkins University Press in 1982.

³ See, for example, Peter Kuzmic, 'History and eschatology: evangelical views' in Bruce J. Nicholls (ed.), *In Word and Deed: Evangelism and Social Responsibility* (Exeter, 1985), 143-4. The concept of 'the great reversal' is well discussed in George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture. The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism* (New York, 1980), 85-93.

concern for the slave. The intensity of evangelical polemic against the slave trade derived, as the Methodist historian Roger Anstey pointed out, from the distinctive contours of evangelical theology.⁴ Evangelical writers at the end of the eighteenth century described redemption as the quintessential blessing afforded to Christians by the death of Christ, and understood the Old Testament accounts of the exodus as typological anticipations of their own salvation experience. For them, observes Anstey, 'God's whole redemptive purpose is placed firmly in the context of physical slavery and liberation'.⁵ Those who had been redeemed from the slavery of sin could not conceivably be implicated in a trade which sold other human beings into bondage, and were obligated by their own experience of divine grace to agitate against their country's involvement in the trade. A liberationist dynamic was therefore integral to the evangelical framework. A theological paradigm had been established through the abolitionist movement which was in principle capable of application to other practices or structures which inhibited human freedom.

Appeal to the general biblical motif of redemption was one way in which evangelicals could establish a scriptural warrant for abolitionism in spite of the apparent toleration of slavery by both Old and New Testaments. More specifically, evangelical abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic employed their exegetical skills with varying degrees of plausibility in an attempt to protect the Bible from any appearance of being a pro-slavery book. Thus the American abolitionist Lewis Tappan insisted in 1850 on the rather slender foundation of Ex. 21:16 and 1 Tim. 1:9-10 that both Old and New Testaments condemned slave-holding as sinful, and that therefore all texts which 'seem to allow it must be construed in accordance with, and not in opposition to the clear prohibitions'.⁶ It was common to argue, more plausibly, that the institution of slavery in ancient Israel was strictly limited by humane provisions which distinguished it from both the slavery of her ancient Near Eastern neighbours and from the slavery of nineteenth-century America.⁷ Perhaps more significant was the tendency of Christian abolitionists from Thomas Scott and Granville Sharp in late eighteenth-century England through to the

⁴ R. T. Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760-1810* (London, 1975), 184-99.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁶ Cited in Ronald C. White, Jr. and C. Howard Hopkins, *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America* (Philadelphia, 1976), 21.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 21-2; Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform* (1980 edn.), 216-17.

Northern abolitionists of the Civil War era to transcend the literal interpretation of texts by appealing to a generalized law of love in the light of which slavery stood clearly condemned as unChristian.⁸ Sometimes this appeal was united to a concept of progressive revelation as an additional solution to the problem. Smith comments that 'long before German critical scholarship became a seminary fashion', evangelical abolitionists were being impelled towards a rational and historical approach to biblical interpretation.⁹

Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect had agitated against the British slave trade in the years up to its abolition in 1807 on the grounds that the trade was a blatant national sin which threatened to bring God's retributive judgement on the nation.¹⁰ The next crucial step in the anti-slavery movement was the acceptance by the beginning of the 1830s by many Christians (Nonconformists more than Anglicans) that slavery itself was sinful, and that the only possible option open to the Christian conscience was to demand immediate abolition.¹¹ The identification of the institution of slavery as sinful was from now on a central feature of evangelical polemic against slavery on both sides of the Atlantic. Most abolitionists recognized that some slave-owners were good and generous, but insisted nonetheless that they were implicated in a system which was itself evil: 'humane masters may soften the hardships of slavery, and render the yoke less intolerable than it generally is; but the nature of the institution, and its essential injustice, remain, even in their hands, the same'.¹² American abolitionists were driven on by the logic of their position to a condemnation of the attitudes of racial prejudice and intolerance which found their institutional expression in the structures of plantation slavery. Ultimately they found themselves advocating a full Christian egalitarianism which demanded the franchise and equal educational opportunities for the Negro.

The full significance of the identification first of the slave trade and then of slavery itself as a sin was that protest against the slave

⁸ Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 188-9; *idem*, 'The pattern of British abolitionism in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries', in C. Bolt and S. Drescher (eds.) *Anti-Slavery, Religion and Reform* (Folkestone, 1980), 21-22; Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 219.

⁹ Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 217.

¹⁰ Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 193-7.

¹¹ Anstey, 'The pattern of British abolitionism', 27.

¹² The Vermont Clergyman Silas McKeen cited in White and Hopkins, *The Social Gospel*, p. 16.

trade or slavery was thereby defined as a moral and religious duty rather than as an act of individual political judgment. The story of evangelical social reform in the nineteenth century is of how one social issue after another became defined in the same way. Evangelical involvement in politics progressively extended as the categories of what was integral to the gospel broadened. To the conservative, the process tends to be seen as part of the march of secularization; to the Christian radical, it represents a laudable sacralization of the cause of social justice.¹³

Dr. David Bebbington has identified three categories of issue which impelled evangelical Christians in the last century into movements of reform and protest.¹⁴ The first and most important comprised those practices current in the public life of the nation which evangelicals perceived to be sinful—as absolutely wrong by biblical standards. Practices or structures which clearly inhibited the spread of the gospel at home or abroad constituted a second category. The peculiar intensity with which British Nonconformists waged the emancipation campaign against West Indian slavery in the early 1830s is explained by the fact that slave-holding had become identified *both* as intrinsically sinful *and* as an obstacle to missionary progress in the islands: the persecution of Baptist and Wesleyan missionaries by the Jamaican colonial authorities enabled William Knibb and other Christian advocates of emancipation to present the issue to the British public in 1832–3 as one of a clear contest between the continuance of slavery and freedom to preach the gospel.¹⁵ The third category of issue which aroused evangelicals to public agitation was closely allied to the second: any instance of government or other public authority giving open countenance or financial support to religious systems which challenged or rivalled Protestant Christianity brought loud and sustained protest.

Almost all of the reforming campaigns for which the nineteenth-century evangelicals are justly revered can be classified according to one or more of the above categories. This activist tradition of evangelical social ethics was more strictly limited in scope than its current admirers realize, and it was limited in scope because it

¹³ See D. B. Davis, 'An appreciation of Roger Anstey' in Bolt and Drescher (eds) *Anti-Slavery, Religion and Reform*, p. 13.

¹⁴ D. W. Bebbington, 'Evangelicals and reform: an analysis of social and political action', *Third Way*, 6, May 1983, 12–13.

¹⁵ See my 'Nineteenth-century liberation theology: Nonconformist Missionaries and Imperialism', *Baptist Quarterly* 32, 1987, 5–9.

was limited in theological motivation. Four principal elements in the motivation of evangelical socio-political action can be discerned.

A *biblicist* motive was almost invariably present in evangelical thought and action on social issues.¹⁶ The Scriptures were held to be normative for the principles and patterns of national life: Anglicans and Nonconformists alike accepted that the Old Testament contained a divinely-revealed paradigm for the life of a godly nation which Britain would ignore at her peril. Repeated parallels were drawn between Victorian Britain and ancient Israel with no apparent awareness of the theological questions which were thereby begged. Anglican Evangelicals such as Shaftesbury were predictably more prepared than Nonconformists to talk explicitly of Britain as 'a Christian kingdom' whose social relations ought to be modelled on biblical principles. The priority of factory reform for Shaftesbury derived from his conviction that the conditions of factory labour contravened fundamental divine principles of national economic life: 'I entertain so deep a feeling on the horrid individual and national Sin of this accursed system that I do not dare to treat the question as I would a turnpike bill or any secondary matter'.¹⁷

A second and prominent strand in evangelical ethical motivation was the *conversionist* motive. It was undoubtedly the slave-owners' threat to freedom of missionary action which was the most potent stimulus to mobilizing Christian public opinion to demand an immediate end to West Indian slavery. Less well known is the importance of a similar motive in the factory reform campaign. Shaftesbury was quite open in his admission that the primary purpose of the campaign for a statutory reduction in the working hours of factory children was to create greater opportunity for their moral and religious education. The campaign was thereby defined as a moral and religious issue, which 'would decide whether the rising generation should learn to distinguish between good and evil', and 'involved the means to thousands and tens of thousands being brought up in the faith and fear of the God that created them'.¹⁸ Shaftesbury disclaimed any intention of legislating for factory operatives or of 'interposing

¹⁶ For Bebbington's definition of evangelicalism in terms of conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism see his *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), 1-17.

¹⁷ Ashley to Graham, 28 March 1843, cited in G. B. A. M. Finlayson, *The Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury 1801-1885* (London, 1981), 193.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

between master and man in the matter of wages';¹⁹ his concern was to bring the factory children within the reach of a sound Christian education, and thus to combine their eternal welfare with the preservation of the social fabric.

The factory reform campaign illustrates most pointedly the existence of a third motive frequently inspiring and regulating evangelical socio-political ethics: a *conservative* motive. Shaftesbury was an unashamed paternalist who was conscious that he stood before the English working classes as a representative of the aristocracy: he was 'no doubt unworthily, the representative of the whole aristocracy in respect of the operatives—should [he] deceive them, they will never henceforward believe that there exists a single man of station or fortune who is worthy to be trusted'.²⁰ Thus in August 1840 Shaftesbury could detail the horrors of child labour before the House of Commons and then include among his reasons for advocating statutory action his concern to remove from the eyes of the poorer classes those things which 'perplex the peaceable, and exasperate the discontented; they have a tendency to render capital odious, for wealth is known to them [the poor] only by its oppressions'.²¹ There was a strong element of romantic ruralism in the factory reform campaign. Shaftesbury's social ideal was precapitalist rather than capitalist, presupposing an agrarian society characterized by harmonious relations between 'a happy Peasantry, and a good landlord'—an ideal which he found modelled in the book of Ruth.²² Nonetheless, there is material in Shaftesbury's speeches and writings on factory reform which could be used to bolster Marxist allegations that the campaign was nothing more than an attempt to put a human face on industrial capitalism in order to guarantee its survival.

Concern to preserve the social fabric could and did prompt evangelicals to agitate for the removal of social and economic abuses, but it could equally well impose strict limits on their enthusiasm for reform, or even incline them to do nothing when modern evangelicals would dearly love them to have acted. In 1833 the Anglican Evangelical newspaper *The Record* defended Parliament's award of £20 million compensation to the West Indian slave-owners for the loss of their property on emancipation

¹⁹ *Hansard*, 63 (1842), 1348.

²⁰ Finlayson, *The Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury*, 180–1.

²¹ *Hansard*, 55 (1840), 1270.

²² Peter Mandler, 'Cain and Abel: two aristocrats and the early Victorian Factory Acts', *Historical Journal*, 27, 1984, 93.

on the grounds that the inviolability of property rights was a principle essential to the preservation of the constitution.²³ William Wilberforce, as is well known, refused to join in public protest against the 'Peterloo Massacre' of 1819, and instead lent his support to the consequent limitation of civil liberties effected by the Six Acts; for Wilberforce the overriding consideration determining Christian political responses at a time of social unrest was the need to shore up the existing constitution.²⁴

To point out the importance of such prudential considerations in the social and political thinking of our evangelical forebears should not be taken as an attack on their Christian integrity or compassion. Although (fourthly) *humanitarian* motives were only rarely advanced as sufficient grounds in themselves for Christian political action, evangelicals did appeal to sentiments of common humanity on behalf of victims of oppression. Enlightenment ideas of what is integral to humanity were the route by which many early evangelicals found their way to a social ethic which sought the dignity and happiness of all men.²⁵ This was most notably true of the original campaign against the slave trade, in which a characteristically Enlightenment insistence on the humanity of even the most degraded slave was a dominant motif: 'I have already gained for the wretched Africans the recognition of their claim to the rank of *human beings*', Wilberforce told a Commons Select Committee in 1791, 'and I doubt not but the Parliament of Great Britain will no longer withhold from them the rights of *human nature*!'²⁶ Similar statements can be found in Shaftesbury, and in his case the appeal to common humanity is given a more explicit basis in a Christian theology of creation. In the very same speech to the Commons in August 1840 in which he argued for factory reform on evangelistic and conservative grounds, Shaftesbury concluded by avowing:

For my own part I will say, though possibly I may be charged with cant and hypocrisy, that I have been bold enough to undertake this task, because I must regard the objects of it as beings created, as ourselves, by the same Maker, redeemed by the same Saviour, and destined to the same immortality.²⁷

²³ I. S. Rennie, 'Evangelicalism and English public life 1823-1850' (Toronto Ph.D. thesis, 1962), 198-9.

²⁴ John Pollock, *Wilberforce* (London, 1977), 268-9.

²⁵ On Evangelicalism's indebtedness to the Enlightenment see Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 20-74.

²⁶ Pollock, *Wilberforce*, 106.

²⁷ *Hansard*, 55 (1840), 1274.

In the privacy of his own diary, Shaftesbury could on occasion express sentiments of an independently Christian character which give the lie to any crudely Marxist understanding of his relationship to industrial capitalism. 'All Peel's affinities are towards wealth and capital', he complained on 24 February 1842, '... *What* has he ever done or proposed for the working classes? ... Cotton is everything, man nothing.'²⁸ The theology of nineteenth-century evangelical social concern was unsophisticated and rarely articulated, but, in Shaftesbury at least, there is a recognition that the body as well as the soul is not only the product of God's creation but also the object of his redemption. Speaking at the Social Science Congress in Liverpool in 1858, Shaftesbury referred to the argument advanced by some Christian critics of advances in public health that more thought should be given to the soul and less to the body. His reply was that the same God who made the soul made the body also'. The body might be an inferior work,

but nevertheless it is His work and it must be treated and cared for according to the end for which it was formed—fitness for His service. The body was the temple of the Holy Ghost, and it ought not to be corrupted by preventable disease, degraded by avoidable filth, and disabled for His service by unnecessary suffering.²⁹

The Anglo-American evangelical tradition of social reform was, of course, more complex than can be suggested within the confines of this paper. There were significant differences between English and American evangelicals and in England itself between Anglicans and Nonconformists. Nonetheless, there were sufficient common features shared by all branches of the tradition for it to be treated legitimately by historians as an integral whole. There is a growing body of scholarly opinion in support of the contention that this evangelical tradition was at least as important as more liberal theological influences in fashioning the rise of the social gospel movement.

The phrase 'the social gospel' began to be used on both sides of the Atlantic from the late 1880s. In 1886 B. F. Westcott used the phrase while preaching on social themes in Westminster Abbey, and two years later the Baptist minister John Clifford entitled his presidential address to the Baptist Union autumn assembly 'The

²⁸ Finlayson, *The Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury*, 195.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 410. Presumably Shaftesbury did not believe that all human bodies were in actuality temples of the Holy Spirit, but had such a lively sense of the potential of all men to receive salvation that his language could become universalistic in tone.

New City of God: or, the Primitive Christian Faith as a Social Gospel'.³⁰ The first recorded use of the phrase in the United States was similarly in 1886, but the label 'the social gospel' was not permanently attached to the American movement for social Christianity until a Christian communitarian colony in Georgia published a magazine entitled *The Social Gospel* from 1898 to 1900.³¹

Some of these early exponents of 'the social gospel' (such as Westcott) were representatives of an existing Christian Socialist tradition rather than of mainstream evangelicalism. But evangelicalism itself had been moving in a similar direction in logical continuity with its long-standing tradition of socio-political concern already described. In England, Nonconformists who had formerly been staunch defenders of the doctrine that education was the preserve of Christian voluntary effort and no business of the State were coming in increasing numbers to recognize that the State alone had sufficient resources to tackle the massive scale of popular ignorance. Christians had always acknowledged that education was a legitimate concern of the churches, but now evangelical perspectives dictated political pressure on governments to provide a system of elementary education which guaranteed the place of the Bible and protected Nonconformist children from Anglican influence. The story was similar on issues of temperance. During the second half of the century Nonconformists became increasingly persuaded that all intoxicating drink was a social evil and an obstacle to effective gospel work amongst the labouring classes. The reliance of the early temperance movement on moral suasion and example now seemed inadequate. Some Nonconformists began to campaign through the United Kingdom Alliance for total prohibition; the more realistic majority pressed with some degree of success for legislation to license public houses and restrict opening hours, especially on Sundays.

Evangelical Nonconformists were now looking to the State to promote policies which created the conditions for the gospel to prosper and social righteousness to flourish. In itself this was not a new development within evangelicalism—the Clapham Sect

³⁰ B. F. Westcott, *Social Aspects of Christianity* (London, 1887), v, 96, cited in D. M. Thompson, 'John Clifford's Social Gospel', *Baptist Quarterly*, 31, 1986, 207; *The Christian World*, 4 October 1886, 758. According to Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 212, Clifford borrowed the phrase from *The Communist Manifesto*.

³¹ White and Hopkins, *The Social Gospel*, 167, 176–7.

had pursued precisely the same political objectives. What was new was the growing recognition that such objectives might have specific implications for detailed questions of social policy. By the early years of this century many Free Church leaders had added housing policy to the list of issues on which Christian principles were held to dictate specific policy commitments. In 1885 even the politically cautious Wesleyan Methodists had awarded housing reform the status of an approved non-party issue on which Wesleyans might legitimately take action.³²

The story of what may be termed the 'social gospel' in Britain is thus one of how Nonconformists appealed to long-established principles of evangelical political action in order to align Nonconformity with a set of social policies and accordingly with the political party which professed those policies. From the 1890s through to 1910 commitment to Christ and commitment to the Liberal Party were for many Nonconformists well-nigh inseparable. 'I am quite sure', pronounced the impeccably evangelical F. B. Meyer while canvassing for the Liberals during the 1906 election campaign, 'that the men with the clearest heads and purest hearts will vote Liberal'.³³ Evangelical Nonconformists such as Meyer were just as much part of this social gospel movement as those of more liberal theology. From 1906 onwards, however, Meyer and some other Evangelical Nonconformists began to draw back from the politicization of Nonconformity, realizing, perhaps too late, that political commitment in the chapels had been achieved at some spiritual cost. Some mid-week services had been abandoned in favour of political meetings, and instances were even reported of ministers ignoring preaching engagements for the sake of speaking for the Liberal Party.³⁴ It may not be an accidental irony that 1906, the year of Nonconformity's greatest political triumph in British history, was also the high-water mark of Free Church membership. Nonetheless, some expressions of the 'evangelical social gospel' continued to be voiced until about 1920: as late as 1919, on the eve of a London County Council election, George Campbell Morgan could be heard preaching a civic gospel urging measures of drainage regulation and pollution and traffic control in the capital.³⁵

Narrowly defined as the process of politicization within the

³² See D. W. Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience: Chapel and Politics 1870-1914* (London, 1982), 42-3.

³³ *Ibid.* 78.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁵ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 211-12.

English Free Churches in the years 1880 to 1910, the social gospel movement emerges as a phenomenon more evangelical than liberal in nature. This impression needs to be balanced by the recognition that a parallel but largely independent trend towards social Christianity characterized Anglicanism in the same period. Christian Socialism in the Church of England drew its inspiration from Mauricean and Anglo-Catholic rather than evangelical sources. There were some Evangelical Anglicans in the period 1880-1920 who espoused an evangelical social gospel, but they were unrepresentative of Evangelical Anglicanism as a whole, which remained suspicious of Christian attempts at social reconstruction.³⁶

At first sight it appears more difficult to present the social gospel in America as in any sense an evangelical phenomenon. Some of the most prominent prophets of the American movement, such as Washington Gladden, were self-confessed modernists. The decade in which social gospel principles made their initial impact on American Protestantism—the 1890s—was also the decade in which German higher criticism and theological liberalism were popularized and disseminated in the churches. William R. Hutchison, a leading historian of American Protestantism, defines the social gospel as an explicitly modernist movement clearly distinguished from the evangelical tradition of social reform by its insistence that ‘social salvation precedes individual salvation both temporally and in importance’.³⁷ According to Hutchison, the social gospel was part of the solution adopted by liberals to the dilemma posed by their espousal of an inclusivist Schleiermacherian understanding of religion—on what grounds could the finality of the Christian revelation be defended and proclaimed to the non-Christian world? The answer given by the American liberals was a development of the teaching of Ritschl and Von Harnack: Christianity alone could meet the needs of the world because it alone offered a perfect ethical ideal based on the unique ethical perfection of the person of Jesus Christ.³⁸ From the reduction of Christianity to ethical idealism it was but a small further step amidst the social ferment of industrializing America to make social ethics the predominant emphasis of the entire Christian message.

This interpretation of the social gospel in America is a cogent

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 212–13.

³⁷ William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), 165n.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 111–114.

explanation of the progression of American liberals towards social gospel principles. It cannot, however, claim to be a comprehensive analysis of the American movement for social Christianity. On the one hand, it has to be stressed that not all liberals were social gossellers: by Hutchison's own reckoning, about one third of the leaders of American theological liberalism in the period between 1875 and 1915 showed little interest in the social gospel.³⁹ On the other hand, a number of historians have argued plausibly that the links of the social gospel with the earlier revivalist tradition of social reform were much stronger than Hutchison suggests.⁴⁰ Timothy L. Smith has charted the process whereby evangelical revivalistic religion after 1865 became increasingly preoccupied with issues such as poverty, the rights of labour, the liquor trade, slum housing and racial problems—a trend closely paralleling developments in English Nonconformity.⁴¹ According to Smith it was evangelicals caught up in the fight against slavery who began to insist that narrowly individualistic understandings of sin and salvation were inadequate. Smith's contention that the holiness movement (which most historians have cited as a reason for the decline in evangelical social concern) was in fact the primary source of this broadening in evangelical theology is debatable, but there is little doubt that the holiness movement shared with other sections of American Protestantism after 1865 a lively awareness of social issues.

American revival religion was the parent not only of later fundamentalism but also of an interdenominational liberal evangelicalism which was a major stream within the social gospel and the seed-bed of the world student movement. The General Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance for the United States from 1886 to 1898, Josiah Strong, was a firm believer in notions of evolutionary progress and one of the chief popularizers of the social gospel.⁴² D. L. Moody was happy to share the platform at his Northfield student conference in 1893 with a recognized social gospel leader such as W. H. P. Faunce.⁴³ Among the other speakers was Moody's own protégé, John R. Mott, rising star of

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁴⁰ See White and Hopkins, *The Social Gospel*, xiv, xvi–xvii, 30n.; Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion Volume 1: The Irony of It All 1893–1919* (Chicago, 1986), 209.

⁴¹ Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 148–62.

⁴² See White and Hopkins, *The Social Gospel*, 55–62; Marty, *The Irony of It All*, 28–31.

⁴³ C. Howard Hopkins, *John R. Mott 1865–1955: A Biography* (Grand Rapids, 1979), 106.

the evangelical student movement and subsequent architect of twentieth-century ecumenism. Earlier that year Mott had declined Moody's offer of the Directorship of his Training Institute in Chicago, the Moody Bible Institute.⁴⁴ The Anglo-American Protestant world of the 1890s held together evangelicals of conservative and liberal tendencies to an extent that late twentieth-century Christian minds find hard to accept. At the heart of the amalgam was the social gospel, equally resistant to the attempts of modern church historians to label it as either 'liberal' or 'conservative'.

The thesis that the social gospel in America owed as much to an existing tradition of evangelical social reform as it did to German theological liberalism can even be defended with some plausibility by appeal to Walter Rauschenbusch himself. Rauschenbusch's *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917) vigorously attacked evangelicals for their individualistic understanding of sin and salvation, and their relegation of social transformation to a future millennium. His alternative was a theology of the kingdom of God derived largely from the theories of Albrecht Ritschl. To this extent Rauschenbusch's credentials as a liberal are unimpeachable. Yet White and Hopkins can insist that 'the theology of Walter Rauschenbusch was rooted in evangelical piety'.⁴⁵ Rauschenbusch began his ministry in New York City in the mid-1880s as an orthodox Baptist concerned to preach the gospel in the slum known as 'Hell's Kitchen'. His prophetic passion for social reform was born out of the grim realities of inner-city ministry. By his own admission, Rauschenbusch's social gospel grew out of praxis: the Ritschlian theology of the kingdom of God was taken on board subsequently to provide a theological rationale for an emphasis in ministry which the mood of the age and the conditions of society seemed to demand.⁴⁶ The initial construction of a theology for a radical social Christianity was done by a group known as 'The Brotherhood of the Kingdom', formed by Rauschenbusch and a number of fellow Baptist ministers in 1892-3 to promote a better understanding in the church of the idea of the kingdom of God and to assist in its realization in the world. An American Ph.D. thesis has sought to establish that this group was substantially influenced by connec-

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁴⁵ White and Hopkins, *The Social Gospel*, xvii, 249.

⁴⁶ See Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (2nd edn, New York, 1913), 339; and *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (2nd edn, New York, 1922), 1, 4-6.

tions with the earlier evangelical tradition of social reform.⁴⁷ Whether or not this case is proven, the general point remains that Rauschenbusch and his associates combined theological indebtedness to German liberalism with emphases and enthusiasms deriving from an indigenous evangelical tradition. Rauschenbusch condemned the toleration of sin in society with all the biblical passion of an earlier evangelical moral crusader; he claimed merely to have broadened existing definitions of sin to include structural expressions of evil.⁴⁸ Similarly Rauschenbusch deplored the 'unChristianized' nature of American industrial capitalism as a stumbling-block preventing non-Christian nations from responding to American missionary work—the well-worn 'obstacle to the gospel' argument was being put to novel use.⁴⁹

I have endeavoured to establish that the social gospel in both Britain and America was a complex and many-sided phenomenon owing as much to existing evangelical patterns of social thought as it did to imported German theology. This argument is important for its own sake, but it must acquire added relevance in the light of the emergence of what may legitimately be described as a new 'social gospel' movement within British and American evangelicalism during the 1970s. White and Hopkins's documentary history of the social gospel concludes with an extract from the Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern of 1973, and notes the significant points of correlation between the new social gospel and the old.⁵⁰ John C. Bennett, an experienced commentator on twentieth-century social theology, even observes that, in comparison with some of the manifestations of the new radical evangelicalism, the old liberal social gospel seems 'tame'.⁵¹

It ought to be said at once that any such correlation needs to be qualified by a recognition of the significant respects in which the social theology of the current 'kingdom' school of radical evangelicals differs from that expounded by Rauschenbusch and his contemporaries. Most of the differences reflect the fact that the former are more sophisticated theologically and more concerned to relate their concept of the kingdom to detailed biblical exegesis

⁴⁷ Frederic M. Hudson, "The Reign of the New Humanity": A Study of the Background, History, and Influence of the Brotherhood of the Kingdom' (Univ. of Columbia Ph.D 1968), cited in White and Hopkins, *The Social Gospel*, 79.

⁴⁸ Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, 349; *idem*, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 69–76.

⁴⁹ Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, 317–18.

⁵⁰ White and Hopkins, *The Social Gospel*, 279–82.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 293.

than the old social gospel advocates ever were. Whereas many turn-of-the-century social gospellers abandoned futurist eschatology almost entirely, contemporary radical evangelicals maintain a much tighter tension between present and future in their understanding of the kingdom, and relate the whole to the decisive victory of the Cross in a way that the old social gospel conspicuously failed to do.

It is, however, my intention in conclusion to emphasize the similarities more than the dissimilarities between the two movements, because I believe it is the similarities which both sides in the current debate within evangelicalism need to perceive. At the heart of the old social gospel was a concern for the authority of the Church in mission, whether on the foreign mission field, where the absolutist claims of Christianity seemed vulnerable, or in the slums of London or New York, where poverty and overcrowding cried out for specifically Christian answers. Much of the impetus behind the new radical evangelicalism has similarly derived from missionary perceptions of the inescapable realities of poverty, hunger and underdevelopment. In response to the insistent demands of human need (and, it must be said, to their perceptions of what the scriptural evidence demands) today's radical evangelicals assert, as did their social gospel forebear, the inadequacy of a purely individualistic understanding of sin and salvation. The theological centrepiece of their understanding of mission is, as it was for Rauschenbusch, the concept of the kingdom of God. It is here that questions of biblical exegesis rather than history become determinative in shaping our evaluation of both movements. Even so committed a disciple of Rauschenbusch as H. E. Fosdick concedes that his mentor 'had difficulties, which he never satisfactorily solved, in harmonizing his concept of the kingdom with the eschatology of the New Testament'.⁵² Rauschenbusch could not stomach the apocalyptic elements in Jesus' teaching about the kingdom: apocalyptic was deplorable, since it relegated the inauguration of the kingdom to a future catastrophic intervention by God; prophecy was commendable, since it (allegedly) conceived of the coming of the kingdom in terms of human ethical development.⁵³ This interpretation of the kingdom in terms of the evolutionary transformation of society and politics by the leaven of Christian ethical ideals rightly gets short shrift from the New Testament

⁵² H. E. Fosdick's introduction to Benson Y. Landis (comp.) *A Rauschenbusch Reader: the Kingdom of God and the Social Gospel* (New York, 1957), xvi.

⁵³ Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 216-25.

scholars. Bruce Chilton and J. I. H. McDonald point out that the social gospel followed Ritschl in emphasizing the immanence of the kingdom to the detriment of its transcendence—and thus lost the vital nexus in the teaching of Jesus between eschatology and ethics.⁵⁴ Norman Perrin's indictment is more sweeping: 'As an interpretation of the teaching of Jesus the Social Gospel movement's understanding of the kingdom is unacceptable for the simple reason that it is not an interpretation of the teaching of Jesus at all.'⁵⁵

Those evangelicals who today advocate the concept of the kingdom of God as the basis for Christian social ethics (and indeed for Christian mission as a whole) are confident that they are building on a much more secure biblical foundation than were Rauschenbusch and his associates. Facile evolutionism is now repudiated by a clear insistence on the discontinuity between human history and the coming of the kingdom: 'the old order cannot evolve into the Kingdom of God'.⁵⁶ Yet, like their predecessors, today's 'kingdom' evangelicals recognize that in the Scriptures sin is more than purely individualistic in character, and conclude that sin is, therefore, also 'structural'. The notion of structural sin raises two problems.

The first is that it may encourage the fallacy that God holds someone or something other than human beings responsible for social evil. This danger is acknowledged by some, at least, of the kingdom school: 'In describing social reality and social evil our intention is by no means to argue against individual responsibility for our social life'.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, the words of a perceptive critic of the old social gospel, P. T. Forsyth, need to be heeded afresh today:

The more I lament and amend social wrongs the more I must realise before God the responsibility for them of me and mine. It is not only the Plutocrats. If it is man that is wronged it is man that has wronged him, it is man that has sinned, man that is condemned. You cannot split up the race.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Bruce Chilton and J. I. H. McDonald, *Jesus and the Ethics of the Kingdom* (London, 1987), 115–16.

⁵⁵ Norman Perrin, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* (London, 1963), 47.

⁵⁶ Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, 'Evangelism and Social Responsibility—A Biblical Study on Priorities', in Nicholls (ed.), *In Word and Deed*, 208.

⁵⁷ Stephen Charles Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (New York, 1982), 14.

⁵⁸ P. T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross* (London, 1909), 36–7)

The second and more fundamental problem is that structural sin implies structural salvation. Rauschenbusch claimed that wherever corporations 'repent' and abandon monopoly capitalism for cooperation and the 'law of service', or wherever undemocratic nations submit to real democracy, 'therewith they step out of the Kingdom of Evil into the Kingdom of God'.⁵⁹ Unredeemed structures could become saved ones by adopting what Rauschenbusch understood to be kingdom values. Some modern evangelical statements appear to veer towards such a view. According to Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, God himself is self-evidently at work whenever human structures are transformed to promote the values of the kingdom, of which democracy again seems to be one.⁶⁰ 'When Kingdom-shaped things happen,' writes Sugden, 'whoever does them and however insignificant they are, God's Kingdom is at work'.⁶¹ Since in the New Testament the kingdom is the realm of the Spirit's sovereign activity, this position seems to imply that even those who are not indwelt by the Spirit may be led by the Spirit when they implement justice or other 'Kingdom-shaped things'.

To point out some of the parallels between modern radical evangelical social ethics and the old social gospel should not be taken necessarily to imply hostility. Rather it is a call for the current debate within evangelicalism to be conducted with a greater degree of awareness of those who have travelled similar pathways before. Equally, evangelicals at the conservative end of the contemporary spectrum need to acknowledge the variety of ingredients that made up the social gospel, and to abandon their continuing tendency to dismiss the social gospel as an unfortunate liberal aberration with no connection with earlier evangelical traditions. The necessity of some resolution of these questions within the evangelical community is urgent, not just because social ethics are important *per se*, but because evangelical theology now contains within its limits as broad a diversity as it did at the opening of the present century. The dangers of a new parting of the ways between conservative and liberal evangelicals are not to be minimized.

⁵⁹ Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 117.

⁶⁰ Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, 'Tensions Between Eschatology and History' in Tom Sine (ed.), *The Church in Response to Human Need* (Monrovia, 1983), 225-6.

⁶¹ Christopher Sugden, *Radical Discipleship* (London, 1981), 69.