

“Unitarians, Universalists, and the Social Gospel: Two Kinds of Social Salvation”

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It has become commonplace, in certain religious circles, to argue that in order for American Christianity to move forward it must reconcile the “social gospel” of mainline Protestantism with the “personal gospel” of the evangelical churches. This view has been articulated most effectively by Jim Wallis, editor of *Sojourners* magazine, and it has been warmly embraced by the thousands of young evangelicals who wish for their tradition to speak out more forcefully on such issues as American racism, global poverty, and climate change. Thus Wallis, in describing a conversation between Paul Raushenbush—great-grandson of one of the leading social gospelers—and megachurch pastor Bill Hybels, has written that “the gospel is both personal and social. Without the personal, a life of faith and commitment to social justice is very difficult to sustain, as some streams of the social gospel eventually demonstrated. And without the social, a personal gospel becomes completely private and loses its integrity, as modern evangelicalism has too often shown.”¹

Unitarian Universalists, for the most part, meet such arguments with perplexity. On the one hand, many of us are thrilled to see the evangelical legions championing some of the causes we have espoused for decades. We happily join living wage and anti-racism campaigns sponsored by “congregation-based organizing projects” that bring us into partnership with mainline and evangelical Protestants, as well as Roman Catholics and

¹ Jim Wallis, “Save Souls or Feed the Poor?” *Huffington Post*, September 21, 2007, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jim-wallis/save-souls-or-feed-the-po_b_65392.html.

(in some cities) members of non-Christian faiths. On the other hand, though, the traditional language of personal salvation can make us nervous. Some of us have been traumatized by childhood experiences in which we were shamed for our failure to achieve the right sort of individual “conversion”; some of us fear that any discussion of “personal morality” is code for hostility toward women, gays, and lesbians. The calls for a blending of the “social” and “personal” gospel may also unsettle those of us with a taste for logical consistency and precision. Is it really possible to preach a gospel that is both personal and social? Or do we have to choose? And, if we do have to choose, ought we also to challenge the “personal” theologies of our evangelical allies? Or should we simply be glad that more and more of them are, for the moment, our allies?

In this essay, I propose to shed some indirect light on these questions by reinterpreting the concept of “social salvation” in the social gospel era of the early twentieth century. To suggest that the “social gospel” must be reconciled with an evangelical “personal gospel” is, I contend, to offer a polemical misreading of the works of the most important mainline Protestant social gospelers. Far from stressing “social salvation” at the expense of “personal salvation,” such thinkers as Josiah Strong, Washington Gladden, and Walter Rauschenbusch insisted again and again that their social vision was meant to supplement rather than replace the individual concerns of traditional evangelicalism. This was position of virtually all of the social gospelers who contributed to the formation of the Federal Council of Churches in 1908, and their “both/and” approach to salvation was institutionalized in the structures of both the Federal Council and its successor, the National Council of Churches. It is true that many evangelicals did not find a comfortable home in the Federal Council, but this was *not*

because their one-sided emphasis on personal salvation clashed with an equally one-sided social emphasis on the part of mainline Protestants. The real clash was between a one-sided evangelicalism and an inclusive mainline Protestantism, and in this sense contemporary advocates of the “both/and” position can be better understood as *renewers* of the mainline, social gospel project than as *reconcilers* of mainline and evangelical Protestantism.

It is not surprising, though, that many contemporary Protestants see the social gospel movement as just one side of a dichotomy that must be resolved. For several decades, the standard historical narrative of early twentieth century Protestantism has focused narrowly on the emergence of a “two party” system dividing mainline and evangelical Protestants.² This narrative fails to recognize that the founders of the Federal Council did not see themselves as the “left” side of a polarized Protestantism. Rather, they experienced themselves as very much in the middle. To their right stood revivalists in the tradition of Dwight Moody (whom they admired) and Billy Sunday (whom they feared), while to the left were Unitarians, Universalists, Ethical Culturists, liberal Jews, self-described Christian Socialists (many of whom aligned with Eugene Debs’s Socialist Party at the beginning of the twentieth century), and exponents of the new academic discipline of sociology. Most of these groups are excluded from standard studies of the Social Gospel.³ Paradoxically, many (though not all) representatives of these traditions

² Two major studies that present this narrative are Jean Miller Schmidt, *Souls or the Social Order: The Two-Party System in American Protestantism* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Publishing, 1991) and Ferenc Szasz, *The Divided Mind of Protestant America, 1880-1930*.

³ Donald K. Gorrell, *The Age of Social Responsibility: The Social Gospel in the Progressive Era* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1988), for example, justifies an exclusive focus on Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Northern Baptists, Northern Methodists, and Northern Presbyterians, on the grounds that these “were more socially active than other Protestant churches” insofar as they “not only espoused social ideas but also created official organizations for social and economic concerns and employed full-time persons to staff them.” Since the Universalist Commission on Social Service and Unitarian Fellowship for

shared the revivalists' sense that one had to choose between personal and social salvation. For them, the social gospel was not a salutary addition to the evangelical faith, but either a "true Christianity" that had been long suppressed or else a "new religion" destined to supersede orthodox Christianity.

In the years just before the founding of the Federal Council, most of its leading figures maintained close connections and alliances with *both* revivalists and representatives of the liberal, "social salvationist" traditions. Josiah Strong, for example, worked closely with soul-saving revivalists in his work as secretary of the Evangelical Alliance, but he was also a founder of the New York State Conference of Religion, an interfaith organization that promoted "cooperation for social salvation" on the grounds that "Religion unites many whom Theology divides."⁴ Both Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch gave major addresses before the Conference (Rauschenbusch's was on the importance of personal religion), as did the Ethical Culturist John L. Elliott. Unitarian William Channing Gannett, Universalist Frank Oliver Hall, and Rabbi Maurice H. Harris sat on the executive committee alongside such socially-minded evangelicals as Leighton Williams, a Baptist and close associate of Rauschenbusch. The Religious Education Association was similarly open to Unitarians and Universalists as well as evangelical Protestants, and in Chicago both the Parliament of World Religions and Jenkin Lloyd Jones's American Congress of Liberal Religious Societies provided opportunities for religious liberals to engage in searching dialogue with at least some members of the "orthodox" churches. Many of the earliest articulations of "social

Social Justice were founded at roughly the same time as the Methodist Federation for Social Service and other mainline agencies, Gorrell's insinuation that Unitarians and Universalists were somehow "less active" seems hard to sustain.

⁴ *Addresses before the New York State Conference of Religion 4/2* (1906).

salvation” appeared in these contexts, and in many ways they set the stage both for the social program of the Federal Council and for the formation of such “secular” reform organizations as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and American Civil Liberties Union.

The formation of the Federal Council, which explicitly excluded Unitarians and Universalists (to say nothing of Jews and Ethical Culturists), marked a parting of the ways among the individuals who had been working so closely together at the beginning of the century. It was not an absolute breach; religious liberals and mainline Protestants continued to interact at university divinity schools, in such organizations as the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and through local partnerships. Personal friendships were not necessarily disrupted. But the Federal Council was a fairly all-consuming project, and to the extent that mainliners devoted themselves to it they had less time to talk to religious liberals. As a result, what had been one conversation about social salvation in 1900 was much more *two* distinct conversations in 1910.

In this essay, I will analyze the rhetoric of “social salvation” in the work of three social gospelers who produced their most influential work around the time of the founding of the Federal Council: Walter Rauschenbusch, John Haynes Holmes, and Clarence Skinner.⁵ Part of my goal, as just suggested, is to clarify our historical picture of the social gospel era. For my friends at Collegium, however, I also wish to raise some questions of both theological substance and ecumenical strategy. Were Holmes and

⁵ The focus on these three thinkers reflects the early stage of this project. Eventually I hope to add in Washington Gladden and Josiah Strong as representatives of the mainline both/and position, and Jenkin Lloyd Jones, Jane Addams, George Herron, and J. Stitt Wilson as representatives of the liberal or socialist either/or. There are also several individuals who may be difficult to categorize; these include the Unitarian Francis Greenwood Peabody, the Methodist Harry Ward (who wrote the “Social Creed” for the Federal Council but also served as an increasingly unnuanced apologist for the Communist Party), and the African American socialist George Washington Woodbey.

Skinner right to suggest that the new gospel of social salvation required a sharp theological break with the personal soteriology of traditional Christianity? And if so, were they also right to refrain from direct debate with those social gospel Christians who believed they *could* have it both ways?

The Both/And Approach of the Mainline Social Gospellers

“There are two great entities in human life,—the human soul and the human race,” declared Walter Rauschenbusch in his breakthrough study of *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, “and religion is to save both. The soul is to seek righteousness and eternal life; the race is to seek righteousness and the kingdom of God.”⁶ Published in 1907, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* galvanized a movement that had been growing steadily in the two decades since Josiah Strong had called the churches’ attention to the problems of industrial society in *Our Country*. During those decades the nation had experienced both a depression that underscored the depths of urban poverty and the rise of a Progressive political movement (personified by President Theodore Roosevelt) that gave hope for far-reaching change. But it was only in the wake of Rauschenbusch’s book that the mainline churches—along with the Unitarians and Universalists—created institutions that could bring the social gospel message to all their congregations. Within five years, virtually all the major denominations of the northern United States had “departments,” “federations,” or “bureaus” of social service, and all but the Unitarians and Universalists joined in forming a “Federal Council of Churches” that made social justice central to its mission.

⁶ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, p. 367. See also Schmidt, p. 110.

Rauschenbusch's insistence that the pursuit of social justice could coexist with a traditional emphasis on personal salvation, however, was nothing new. The two leading social gospelers of the previous generation, Washington Gladden and Josiah Strong, had both said as much on many occasions. In *The New Era*, for example, Strong qualified his emphasis on social salvation by acknowledging that it was second to personal salvation. "The mistake of the churches has been, not in emphasizing the first great commandment, but in neglecting the second. If the pendulum should now swing to the other extreme and the churches should emphasize the second commandment to the neglect of the first, that would be a mistake greater than the other. . . There can be no substitute for right relations with God."⁷ And Rauschenbusch reiterated the claim in *Christianizing the Social Order*, where he wrote that "The triumphant return of the Kingdom idea has marked its line of march by thrice-born men"—referring, of course, to physical birth, evangelical conversion, and conversion to the ideals of the social gospel.⁸

Rauschenbusch's most systematic work was *Theology for the Social Gospel*, and here he recurred repeatedly to the challenge of integrating the "new" gospel of social salvation (which he did not, of course, take to be entirely new) with the "old" gospel of personal salvation. In many places, he described this as a matter of simple addition: "It is a comfort to me to know that the changes required to make room for the social gospel are not destructive but constructive. They involve addition and not subtraction."⁹ Almost a hundred pages later, he wrote that "our discussion can not pass personal salvation by. We might possibly begin where the old gospel leaves off, and ask our readers to take all the

⁷ Josiah Strong, *New Era*, p. 118, cited in Schmidt, p. 104.

⁸ Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order*, p. 94, in Schmidt, p. 104.

⁹ Rauschenbusch, *Theology for the Social Gospel*, p. 11.

familiar experiences and truths of personal evangelism and religious nurture for granted in what follows.”¹⁰

In this passage, however, Rauschenbusch went on to suggest that the new understanding of salvation must be integrated with the old, rather than merely added: “our understanding of personal salvation itself is deeply affected by the new solidaristic comprehension furnished by the social gospel.”¹¹ He made this point even more vigorously in a later chapter, writing that “It is not sufficient to set the two aims of Christianity side by side. There must be a synthesis, and theology must explain how the two react on each other.”¹² Still, in my judgment he never fully achieved the promised integration. He came close in explaining why he identified “sin” with “selfishness.” Though he considered this definition part of the “old” theology (evidently forgetting the long Augustinian tradition that saw pride as the root of other sins), Rauschenbusch shifted the emphasis by “putting humanity into the picture” and treating “salvation” as “a change which turns a man from self to God and humanity.”¹³ He came even closer to an integrated view in his account of the atonement, arguing that Jesus was able to bear the sins of the world precisely because of his unprecedented “solidarity” with other human beings: “The stronger and more universal a human personality is, the more will he consciously absorb the general life and identify himself with it. . . . Jesus had an unparalleled sense of solidarity. Thereby he had the capacity to generalize his personal experiences and make them significant of the common life.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Rauschenbusch, *Theology for the Social Gospel*, p. 96.

¹¹ Rauschenbusch, *Theology for the Social Gospel*, p. 96.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 144.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 245-46.

But, again and again, in the remainder of the book, Rauschenbusch relied on the conjunction “and” rather than any deeper theological analysis to explain the relation between personal and social salvation: “The saint of the future will need not only a theocentric mysticism which enables him to realize God, but an anthropocentric mysticism which enables him to realize his fellow-men in God.”¹⁵ “The establishment of a community of righteousness in mankind is just as much a saving act of God as the salvation of an individual from his natural selfishness and moral inability.”¹⁶

In any case, whether social salvation was added to or integrated with personal salvation, Rauschenbusch clearly did not want to let go of personal salvation. The reasons for this are not entirely clear. Rauschenbusch was not always respectful of traditional evangelical soul-saving; in one passage, he complained that “some who have been saved and perhaps reconsecrated a number of times are worth no more to the Kingdom of God than they were before. Some become worse through their revival experiences, more self-righteous, more opinionated, more steeped in unrealities and stupid over against the most important things, more devoted to emotions and unresponsive to real duties.”¹⁷

Rauschenbusch even had a taste for unorthodox theological speculation; in his chapter on heaven he speculated playfully on the moral implications of both reincarnation and purgatory. His own vital interest, clearly, was focused on this world rather than the next. But much as he condemned a one-sided focus on heaven, his emphatic concern was with the one-sidedness rather than with heaven itself: “There is no inherent contradiction whatever between the hope of the progressive development of mankind toward the

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 108.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 139-40.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 96 [or 97—doublecheck].

Kingdom of god and the hope of the consummation of our personal life in an existence after death.”¹⁸

The Either/Or Approach of Holmes and Skinner

Rauschenbusch’s contemporary John Haynes Holmes articulated a very different understanding of “social salvation” in a sermon of that title preached in 1910, shortly after he assumed the office of president of the newly founded Unitarian Fellowship for Social Justice. Far from presenting “social salvation” as a needed addition to a basically sound traditional theology, Holmes placed it at the center of a “new religion, which is destined to supersede” a “dying” Protestantism and “dead” Catholicism.¹⁹ Where Rauschenbusch repeatedly used the conjunction “and” to explain his view of salvation, Holmes relied on a stark either/or.

This is not to say that there was no place for the individual in Holmes’s “new religion.” But its personal dimension was expressed not as salvation from sin but as liberation from external authority. “Putting aside all idea of existing supernatural authority,” Holmes wrote, the new religion “bases itself exclusively upon the inward and wholly natural authority of the soul.”²⁰ This idea, Holmes noted, was deeply rooted in the Unitarian tradition, and in itself it represented a stark alternative to the traditional Christian understanding of personal salvation. “To save the individual, this has been the work of the church from the day when Jesus was first called Saviour down even to the present time,” Holmes explained, but it is not the work of Unitarianism. Instead, the

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 228.

¹⁹ John Haynes Holmes, ““Social Salvation: A New Gospel for a New Age,” *Messiah Pulpit*, December 1910, p. 3.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 3-4.

Unitarian “movement is remarkable as constituting an absolute break with this whole theory of salvation, in both its Catholic and Protestant forms. This break is caused by the fact that we refuse to accept that low and degrading estimate of human nature upon which every scheme of salvation has been founded.” Unitarians are concerned primarily with nurturing and educating the individual character, and “nothing could seem to be more essentially antagonistic than the idea of salvation by faith and that of salvation by character.”²¹

Though all of this reads as a polemical attack on traditional Christianity, for Holmes it was merely a rhetorical device that set up a more fundamental antithesis. “The antagonism here,” he continued, “is more apparent . . . than it is real.” In its emphasis on character development, Holmes explained, “liberalism, like orthodoxy . . . is essentially an individualistic religion. . . . We desire to save ourselves.”²² As such, it contradicted the new insight of sociological research: “strictly speaking, there is no such thing as an individual.”²³

Holmes acknowledged that this sociological insight could be found in Plato, Aristotle, and Saint Paul, as well as in recent scholarship responding to evolutionary theory and the industrial economy, but he nevertheless insisted that it was far too “revolutionary” and “epoch-making”²⁴ to be a mere add-on to either the traditional evangelical or the Unitarian gospel. It was required nothing less than “a new gospel for a new age” and “a new religious gospel for this new age of social idealism.”²⁵ The essence of this new gospel was “social salvation,” understood as a clear alternative to all

²¹ Ibid., pp. 5, 7, 9.

²² Ibid., pp. 10-11.

²³ Ibid., p. 13.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 15-17.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 4, 17.

individualistic schemes of either salvation or character-development. The new gospel had a new “purpose” as well as a new “method”; “it affirms that our concern is primarily with the world and not primarily with the individual; with the body rather than with the several members of the body; with the whole rather than with the parts. It affirms that it is our business to save the world and in this salvation the individual will have his share as a matter of course.”²⁶

The new gospel, Holmes went on to explain, had three “revolutionary” consequences. First, it demanded a more militant ecclesiology. The church could no longer be “a passive witness of salvation,” but was called to be “an active agent,” “the body of those who are saviours of the world from the evils which assail it.” Second, it required the complete elimination of the traditional boundary between church and world, the religious and secular realms. “Every question,” thundered Holmes, “becomes . . . at bottom a religious question. . . . The church will enter into the field of industry, and constrain the controlling forces of labor and capital to cease their warfare and unite upon a common platform of mutual co-operation. . . . It will enter the field of politics and purify this Augean Stable of its rottenness.”²⁷

In his third “revolutionary” consequence, Holmes managed to turn even the traditional Christian vocabulary against itself. The new gospel, he explained, would transform not only the church’s attitude toward the world but also the individual’s attitude “toward the problem of his own life.” Far from pursuing either evangelical salvation or Unitarian character, the individual’s duty is “to forget himself utterly, and give himself to the service of the world. He must not think of his own soul; he must not

²⁶ Ibid., p. 22.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 22, 24.

ask if his hands are clean and his heart pure; he must not bother about his own character whether it be good or bad.” If the only valid measure is the well-being of the social whole, “It makes no difference how kind and generous and charitable we are; if we do this because we think that it is virtuous and will make us better men and women, it is as bad as though we did nothing at all. ‘Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not love,’ said St. Paul, ‘it profiteth me nothing.’”²⁸ It is not clear whether Holmes imagined that Paul would have endorsed this use of his words, but this single concession to the “old” religion would likely have resonated with his Universalist friend Clarence Skinner.

Skinner made a closely parallel argument in *The Social Implications of Universalism*, a short book that continues to be widely admired by Unitarian Universalists even though it is out of print and virtually unknown to mainline scholars of the Social Gospel. Like Holmes, Skinner did not hesitate to pronounce a eulogy on the traditional gospel of personal salvation: “The fact is that the traditional Protestant Church is dying, dying hard with colors flying, and battling heroically, but nevertheless dying. It ought to be so. The theology upon which it is built is dying; the individualism which called it into being is dying; the social order which it expressed is dying. Why should it not also die?”²⁹ The theology of individual salvation, he explained, had been born in an age of “hopeless poverty, despotism and slavery,” when it was quite understandable for the church to offer people little more than “a blessed place in the life after death” and “ecstatic emotions and mystic visions” in this life. In a progressive and prosperous society, such theology was entirely dysfunctional, and thus the two approaches to

²⁸ Ibid., p. 26.

²⁹ Skinner, *Social Implications*, p. 1.

salvation were antithetical: “Only those theologies which frankly and persistently align themselves with the world, and openly champion its potential goodness, can logically enter the great reformation of the twentieth century. . . . This is social salvation. All others believe that salvation comes by escaping from a world which is inherently unsavable. That is the individualistic, anti-social, medieval faith.”³⁰

The most striking difference between Holmes and Skinner is their contrasting attitudes to their own denominations—traditions that were moving closer together but still quite distinct in the early twentieth century. While Holmes portrayed the Unitarian stress on character as an unsatisfactory echo of evangelical salvation, Skinner announced proudly that Universalism had taught a solidaristic understanding of salvation all along. Not only did Universalism teach “the divine origin of all men,” Skinner explained, but it also “proclaimed”—by means of the defining doctrine of universal salvation—“the common destiny of humanity in all times and in all stations of life.” This was as relevant, Skinner believed, for the present life as for the life to come: “Never was there such a bold proclamation of brotherhood as this; never such implicit faith in the solidarity of the human race. It is the largest, most astonishing evidence of the new social consciousness.”³¹

It is not at all clear that all of Skinner’s Universalist forebears would have endorsed the activist, thisworldly corollaries that he drew from the doctrine of universal salvation. “A man must not only work out his own salvation,” Skinner explained a bit incoherently, “he must work out the salvation of the world. . . . He cannot be saved except as he spiritualizes and Christianizes all the influences which are consciously or

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 43, 45, 48-49.

³¹ Ibid., p. 38.

unconsciously molding character.”³² Skinner also zigzagged precariously between singing the praises of Universalism and declaring the “urgent need for some universal, democratic faith which will be a true spiritual interpretation of contemporary life.”³³ Clearly, he was not fully satisfied with the life of his denomination as he found it, much as he saw in its defining doctrine a key to the new religion to which both he and Holmes aspired.

For both Holmes and Skinner, the preferred vehicle for the new religion was the “community church,” a thoroughly non-dogmatic congregation in which a variety of speakers would challenge congregants to a higher standard of social solidarity and activism. Drawing on the example of Jenkin Lloyd Jones’s Abraham Lincoln Center in Chicago, Holmes transformed his New York congregation into a community church, and collaborated with Skinner in creating a similar project in Boston. Their activist, lay-oriented approach to congregational life was emulated—in part out of sheer necessity—by many of the new Unitarian or Unitarian Universalist “fellowships” created in the 1950s and 1960s. From the perspective of official Unitarian Universalism, the community church model was not a stunning success: very few large congregations have been built on Holmes and Skinner’s model. Holmes’s more significant legacy can be found in the secular or interfaith organizations that were sustained in their early years by members of his congregations: the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the American Civil Liberties Union, and (to a lesser degree), the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Though the achievements of these groups lent credence to Holmes’s claim that the new religion was emerging “both inside *and outside* of our existing church

³² Ibid., pp. 65-66.

³³ Ibid., p. 68.

organizations,” they also drew religious liberals into an institutional milieu that was very separate from that of the mainline churches.³⁴

Some Concluding Reflections

The contrast between the two versions of social salvation raises many intriguing questions. First, given the starkly different approaches of Rauschenbusch on the one hand and Holmes and Skinner on the other, why didn't they engage in forthright debate? It is surely not the case that they were unaware of one another—in fact, Holmes was one of the few friends who stood by Rauschenbusch in the closing years of the latter's life, when he was alienated from many mainline allies because of his opposition to World War I. (Rauschenbusch was not as unwavering a pacifist as Holmes, but his own German ancestry made it easier for him to see through American jingoism.) Yet, as far as I have been able to determine, none called attention to their theological differences.

At this stage of my research, I can see at least two plausible reasons for this reticence. The first is the fact that, for all three men, their theological differences were overshadowed by the enthusiasm they felt about the rapid expansion of social consciousness between 1890 and 1910. To an extent that is difficult to grasp in 2008, they all felt that history was moving rapidly *and* in the right direction. They were also humbled by the newness of the sociological insight. As Holmes's criticism of Unitarianism makes clear, they all knew that their own traditions had not always seen matters aright, and this made them hesitant to criticize others directly. Jenkin Lloyd Jones gave vivid expression to this sentiment in a column celebrating the twenty-first anniversary of *Unity*, when he wrote that his own efforts to promote liberal religion had

³⁴ Holmes, “Social Salvation,” p. 3, my emphasis.

been overshadowed by “the new revealings of religion and religious duties implied in the words ‘sociology,’ ‘settlements,’ ‘civic consciousness’ and the ‘corporate conscience.’

The creeds have not been killed, dogmas have not been disproven, but, like the white and black magic of medieval ages, they are being forgotten in the preoccupation of other thoughts and other duties.”³⁵ Liberals like Jones were undoubtedly chastened by the observation of Chicago sociologist—and Baptist—Albion Small, who told the Congress of Liberal Religious Societies that all denominations were talking more about society before noting that “I may be pardoned for claiming that liberalism is provincial in so far as it assumes that its spirit is today pre-eminently humane.”³⁶

The second reason for reticence, which would have loomed larger by the 1920s, was the fact that many conservative evangelicals did *not* hesitate to articulate their criticisms of the emerging mainline. . . .

Despite their sharp disagreements with the mainline, then, the primary strategy of religious liberal social gospelers was to maintain a sympathetic silence in the face of fundamentalist attack. Gradually, however, this sympathetic silence gave way to silent disengagement, as mainliners became increasingly absorbed in the work of Protestant ecumenism and religious liberals deepened their alliances with secular activist organizations. By the second half of the twentieth century, many heirs of the Protestant social gospel had forgotten that Unitarians, Universalists, and other religious liberals had once been vital conversation partners.

By the second half of the twentieth century, moreover, the heirs of the Protestant social gospel were rapidly losing their share of the American religious marketplace. From

³⁵ “Our Majority,” *Unity*, March 2, 1899, p. 529.

³⁶ Albion Small, “The Sociological Basis of Religious Union and Work,” in *Proceedings of the First American Congress of Liberal Religious Societies* (Chicago: Bloch & Newman, 1894), p. 30.

the perspective of the “two party” framework, it appeared that mainline Protestants have were losing ground to the evangelicals, and on this basis many mainliners have sought to emulate evangelical practices—increasing their disengagement from religious liberals as well as from many of their own theology professors. Yet the group of religiously unaffiliated people has also grown in the twentieth century, and it would appear that mainline Protestant defections have primarily been toward the unaffiliated group rather than the evangelicals. One might reasonably hypothesize—in line with Holmes’s emphasis on the presence of the new religion outside the churches—that many of the unaffiliated find a quasi-religious sense of community in progressive social movements promoting economic, social, or ecological justice. If this is so, then the numerical decline of the mainline might well be traced not to its excessive emphasis on social salvation, but on its stubborn insistence on both social and personal salvation, in an age when most Americans would prefer one or the other.