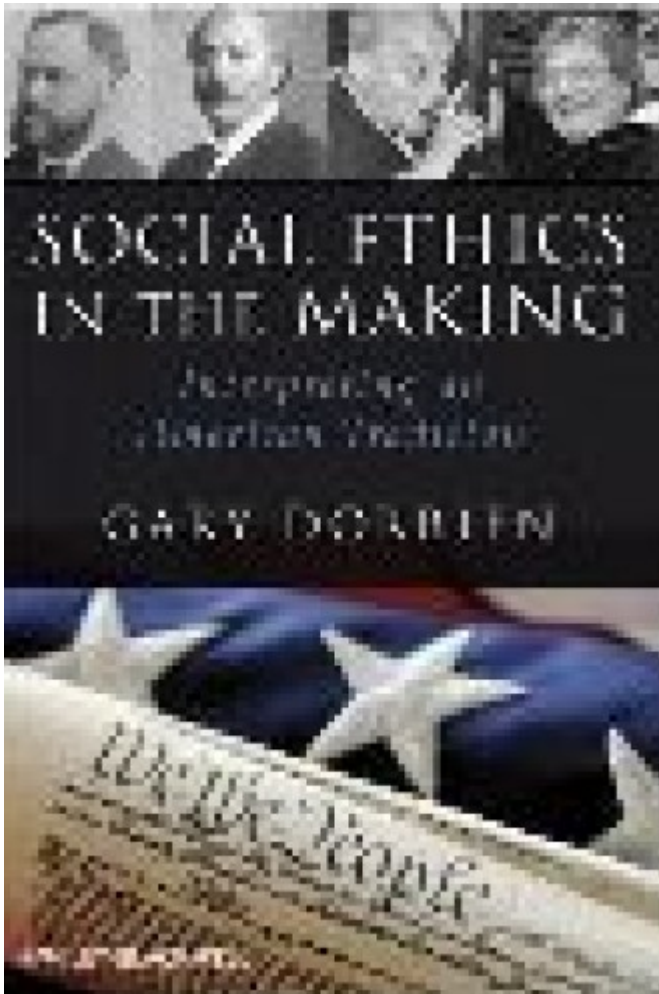


Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition

reviewed by [Paul J. Wadell](#) in the [October 20, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition

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Is Christianity relevant? Can it help us understand and resolve the social, economic, political and cultural problems that beset us?

We continue to wrestle with the answers to these questions, but we are hardly the first to ask them. Beginning in the 1800s, theologians, ministers and social activists challenged an overly privatized and spiritualized version of Christianity as they strove to awaken Christians in the United States to the social significance of their beliefs. Their fundamental conviction was that religion should produce not only flourishing individuals, but flourishing communities and societies as well. And they believed this would happen if the gospel's powers for social regeneration were unleashed. Their aim was to transform society in light of the new social order envisioned in Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God. This project to work for a more socially responsible Christianity marked the beginning of the Social Gospel movement, and from those fiery and visionary roots Christian social ethics in the U.S. was born.

In this magnificent, sprawling and monumental book, Gary Dorrien maps the origins and development of Christian social ethics in the U.S. by making an insightful and detailed analysis of its three major traditions: the Social Gospel movement, Christian realism, and the more recent liberation theologies. Along the way he narrates the background and contributions of the major figures in Christian social ethics, rescuing some who have been forgotten. He assesses each one's achievements and suggests an agenda for the future.

The story begins with the founders of the discipline of social ethics, Francis Greenwood Peabody at Harvard, William Jewett Tucker at Andover Seminary and Graham Taylor at Chicago Theological Seminary. They wanted their discipline to replace the reigning moral philosophy of Scottish realism and hoped that it would find a place in the academy if they linked it to the social sciences, particularly sociology. Christian social ethics could then temper the rise of social Darwinism in the social sciences while mimicking the social sciences by taking a scientific approach to ethics.

More generally, they wanted to show that Christianity was relevant to society and that it was useful for addressing the most challenging social issues of the time. In response to charges that Christianity was socially tone deaf and irredeemably conservative, they turned to the preaching and example of Jesus to delineate a socially conscientious Christianity that was especially attuned to the plight of the working class and the poor.

These pioneers of the Social Gospel movement were later eclipsed by Washington Gladden, often called the father of the Social Gospel, and Walter Rauschenbusch, its most significant and impassioned proponent. For Gladden and Rauschenbusch, the Social Gospel combined a critique of the existing social and economic order with a vision of a renewed and transformed society.

Their primary target was capitalism. Gladden preached that unrestrained capitalism turned economics into a war in which only the strong survive. For him, the irony of capitalism was that it attempted to build society “on an anti-social basis.” Likewise, Rauschenbusch claimed that capitalism was systemically morally corrupt because it cultivated self-interest, made economic gain the sovereign principle for life and diminished one’s sense of care for and responsibility to others.

Fearing that capitalism had become so ruthless and predatory that it underwrote a philosophy of survival of the fittest, Gladden invoked the kingdom of God and argued that cooperation and self-sacrificial love, not harsh competition and laissez-faire economics, marked the path toward a society of justice, equality and peace. Rauschenbusch contended that the prophets and Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom made Christianity a revolutionary religion in which the vocation of the church was not only to turn persons from sin but also to Christianize the social order. For him, the antidote to an economic system that cultivated selfishness was democratic socialism, which, unlike capitalism, recognizes the social nature of human beings and the responsibilities that each person has to others, particularly those most in need.

Dorrien acknowledges that the shortcomings of the Social Gospel movement were many. It could be “sentimental, moralistic, idealistic, and politically naïve.” In some instances it “baptized the Anglo-Saxon ideology of Manifest Destiny, and rationalized American imperialism.” And despite its call for freedom and equality, it gave little attention to racial discrimination or women’s rights. Nonetheless, in its evangelical fervor it renewed Christianity in the U.S. by challenging Christians to recognize the undeniable social character of Jesus’ teachings and ministry and, therefore, the social responsibility of the churches. Indeed, by introducing the idea of social salvation it instigated a crucial development in Christian theology and blazed a path for everything that followed in Christian social ethics.

The hope and idealism that inspired the Social Gospel movement were severely challenged by World War I. Initially Rauschenbusch hoped that the crisis would

expand the Social Gospel's critique beyond capitalism so it could also address the ways in which the global community is threatened by nationalism, militarism and imperialism—social manifestations of original sin and wretched examples of the kingdom of evil. But ultimately the carnage spelled the end of the Social Gospel for Rauschenbusch, who died during the final weeks of the war.

The Social Gospel didn't die with Rauschenbusch; instead, Dorrien argues, it had its greatest influence on American churches and seminaries in the decades immediately following World War I, a time marked by an increase in the number of social justice ministries, antiwar movements, and peace and reconciliation fellowships. Still, Rauschenbusch correctly surmised that the seeds of the Social Gospel's demise were sowed in fields ravaged by war. There was no one more eager to reap the harvest than Reinhold Niebuhr, the founder of Christian realism.

In 1932 Niebuhr issued *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, a blistering attack on the liberal Christianity that had inspired the Social Gospel movement, a form of Christianity that he derided as hopelessly optimistic and dangerously naive. In its idealism and sentimentality, Niebuhr charged, it failed to appreciate the brutal forces of history, the tragic character of life and the unyielding influence of egotistic self-interest on human behavior.

For Niebuhr, there is no such thing as a purely good act because, given the sinful nature of human beings, every deed, however sincere, is unavoidably a mixture of good and evil; every gesture of altruistic love or compassion is corrupted by self-interest. What is true in personal relationships is all the more so in societies. Given the resilient power of collective self-interest, Niebuhr argued, it is recklessly irresponsible to attempt to transform society according to the gospel's law of love. The most that can be hoped for in society is rough approximations of justice that can restrain the threatening forces of injustice by securing a relative balance of power among competing interests.

Contrary to the proponents of the Social Gospel, Niebuhr contended that the ethical teaching of Jesus had no relevance for society other than as a sober reminder of how societies are bound to fall short of the gospel's perfectionist ethic of love. In a world that requires calculation and compromise, that contains force and threats, it is both stupid and irresponsible to call nations to embrace Jesus' renunciation of violence and love of enemies. As Dorrien summarizes, "The peace of the world in a fallen world could not be gained by following the way of Christ. Neither could it be gained

by turning the perfectionism of Jesus into a social ethic. . . . To insert a perfectionist ethic into public discussion was to imperil the interests of justice.”

A fundamental problem with Niebuhr’s Christian realism was that it was more a reaction against the vision of a good society espoused by the Social Gospel movement than it was a constructive proposal for something else. This was not helped by the polemical and defensive tone that characterized many of Niebuhr’s writings. That Niebuhr failed to give a clear account of what he wanted society to be is one reason Christian realism ended up giving theological justification to the economic and political interests of the U.S.—the very things Niebuhr aimed to critique. Instead of becoming a theological perspective through which to view the world, Christian realism was characteristically provincial and nationalistic, and thus rightly criticized for overlooking the impact that U.S. policies had on the rest of the world.

Perhaps the most incisive critique of Christian realism came from the Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder. Yoder argued that in dismissing the relevance of Jesus’ teachings for society, Christian realists undermined real possibilities for change. More seriously, in linking Jesus’ teachings to a purely eschatological kingdom, they failed to appreciate that the reign of God entered the world in Jesus and signaled the start of a new social order that was to be embraced by Jesus’ followers.

For Yoder, Christian social ethics lost its way when its practitioners assumed that they had to find its norms and principles outside the gospel. What they failed to realize—or were afraid to acknowledge—was that Jesus, in his call for liberation and justice for the poor, in his renunciation of violence, and particularly in his suffering love, exemplified a social ethic with radical implications for the political and economic orders of societies. Thus the problem was not that Jesus’ ethic was irrelevant for society but that, as Dorrien writes, “most Christian leaders did not want the social ethic that Jesus proclaimed, . . . so they brushed it aside.”

Yoder’s critique was expanded and elaborated by Stanley Hauerwas, who chided both the Social Gospel movement and Christian realism for making the nation the subject of Christian social ethics and subordinating the teachings of Jesus to the needs and demands of liberal American society. Instead of accommodating the gospel to society, social ethicists needed to see that the ethical teaching of Jesus is to be embodied and witnessed to in the habits and practices of the distinctive moral

community that is the church. Put differently, for Hauerwas Christian social ethics is not a theory but a way of life that in its faithfulness to Jesus has power to transform the world. As Dorrien observes, “For Hauerwas, the ‘real world’ was not the social order of ubiquitous violence described by Niebuhr and other social ethicists that liberalism sought to manage. The real world, for a Christian, was the kingdom-disclosing social reality inaugurated by the resurrection of the crucified Christ.”

The final tradition that Dorrien examines is liberation theology. He focuses on American varieties of black liberation theology, feminist theology and Latina feminist theology. The move to liberation theologies constitutes a major shift in Christian social ethics not only because these theologies are an important critique of both the Social Gospel movement and Christian realism, but also because the emergence of these theologies represented the first time that the major figures of Christian social ethics were not white males.

Despite the differences and disagreements among liberation theologians, their collective focus on justice for those who have been consistently excluded and oppressed on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation has provided a salutary and long-needed corrective to the tradition. Indeed, in a concluding chapter, in which Dorrien laments the persistence of racism and mourns a growing U.S. militarism and imperialism, he insists that none of these problems will be overcome without “a multicultural, feminist, ecological consciousness” that enriches our understanding of what a good society should be.

Social Ethics in the Making will soon be recognized as a classic. It is a captivating, expertly written and exhaustively researched pilgrimage through the changing landscape of Christian social ethics. The price of the book may prevent many from accompanying Dorrien along this path, but anyone who undertakes the journey will be richly rewarded.