

The Social Gospel and the Millennial Response

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In her chapter called *Deciding Who Counts*, Susan Lindley gives a modern definition of the Social Gospel. She explains, “The Social Gospel was distinguished, on the one hand, from general charity and humanitarian work by the religious motivation behind its ideas and activities and its insistence on connecting social ideals with the Kingdom of God, at least partially realizable in the world.”¹ There are two important matters to be noted about this definition. First, there is a very particular intentionality behind the Social Gospel that is vastly different from regular charitable actions. The intentionality is continuing the work of Jesus Christ, who is a pinnacle example of fusing societal matters with religious virtues and actions. The second matter to be noted is that the goal of the Social Gospel, and in most cases the doctrinal focus, is the Kingdom of God. Each social gospeler may interpret the Kingdom differently, especially in terms of if, how, and when it will come about.

The Social Gospel was arguably one of the most impactful religious movements in America during the 20th century. With their revolutionary theological doctrines of social change and equality, the work and writings of Social Gospel leaders like as Walter Rauschenbusch and Dorothy Day have had a lasting effect up to the present day. These prominent social gospelers have certainly had an impact on the theology of young, popular religious activists of today such as Shane Claiborne and Eugene Cho. Yet the question remains: what are the key theological ideas of the Social Gospel, according to Rauschenbusch and Day, and how do they relate to the theological ideas of present day social gospelers?

Furthermore, what impact has the Social Gospel had on the millennial generation with regards to social action and change? Howe and Strauss, authors of one of the first books on the generation entitled *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, claim that, “For decades, Americans have been waiting for a youth generation that would quit talking and start doing.”² These authors lead us to ask if millennials have bought into these expectations of both former social gospelers and sociologists. There is an ample amount of research done on the millennial generation that allows for such an inference to be made. On one hand, the Social Gospel movement had a direct impact on theology that is popular amongst young theologians who are socially conscious. On the other, it has made an indirect impact on millennials who are socially minded and/or religiously active. Therefore, the Social Gospel has made a prominent impact on the leading, social acting theologians of the millennial generation; however, these teachings struggle to be manifested through the actions of the millennial generation.

Leading Voices of the Social Gospel

The Social Gospel movement invited Christians to live profoundly different from how American Christians had been living. Rauschenbusch’s call for Christian living hinged upon one’s contribution of justice and not postponing the effort till a later generation.

¹ Evans, Christopher Hodge. *The Social Gospel Today*. Louisville: Westminster John (Knox Press, 2001), p 24.

² Howe, Neil, and William Strauss. *Millennials Rising: The next Great Generation*. New York: Vintage Books, 2000. 3

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Therefore, the responsibility of each Christian grew and became much more intense, especially with regards to their social involvement and service to community. The Social Gospel according to Rauschenbusch purports that, “the greatest contribution which any man can make to the social movement is the contribution of a regenerated personality, of a will which sets justice above policy and profit.”³ Yet, what does Rauschenbusch mean by social movement and regenerated personality? Social movement is a term that Rauschenbusch uses interchangeably with social progress, the idea of moving society forward to a better state. Literally, regenerate means to cause to arise again. Rauschenbusch is alluding to the fact that a regenerated personality “will in some measure incarnate the principles of a higher social order in his attitude to all questions and in all his relations to men.”⁴ He makes the connection that a regenerated soul re-arises from its poor relations of “policy and profit” with others, to a “higher social order,” which will in fact bring about social progress in the form of justice. Therefore, Rauschenbusch calls the Christian individual to live a lifestyle of a regenerated personality, causing one to raise every relation to a higher standard of justice.

In addition to social regeneration, Rauschenbusch’s primary theological focus was on the Kingdom of God, which he explained would bring wholeness to all human relationships, Christianize society, and bring righteousness to the entire human person as well as all of humanity. For Rauschenbusch, there were three main elements of the society he called the Kingdom of God, which are love, service, and equality.⁵ Love is the most important virtue of the three and the most necessary in bringing about the Kingdom of God. Rauschenbusch used the love of Christ for all humans as the primary support of this notion, and rightly so, as Christ is an exemplary example of love. Scripture makes it clear; the stories of Jesus at social meals and at encounters with social undesirables reveal the Kingdom of God is a society founded upon love.⁶ Through these examples of Christ, it is revealed that love forms connectedness amongst a community. Therefore, as Rauschenbusch explains, “The fundamental virtue in the ethics of Jesus was love, because love is the society-making quality.”⁷ Consequently, love is the only way by which Rauschenbusch believed the Kingdom of God would come about, because love is and will be the ultimate bond for all of human society.

Walter Rauschenbusch and his theological contributions are central to the Social Gospel. This is supported by Evans’ comment that, “The decline of the social gospel has often been linked with the coming of WWI and ... the deaths of key leaders like Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch.”⁸ Yet, it is equally important to note that by no means did the Social Gospel stop. After the deaths of the movement’s forefathers, and after WWI and WWII, the social movement became much more ecumenical, gaining new theological perspectives which resulted in a variety of opinions on how Christians should think, act, and respond to social issues. One of these emerging voices post-WWII was

³ Rauschenbusch, Walter, and Anthony Campolo. *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century: The Classic That Woke up the Church*. New ed. San Francisco, Calif.: Harper (San Francisco, 2008), 287.

⁴ Rauschenbusch and Campolo 287.

⁵ Rauschenbusch and Campolo, 57.

⁶ Rauschenbusch and Campolo 57.

⁷ Rauschenbusch and Campolo 55.

⁸ Evans, *"The Social Gospel as "the Total Message of the Christian Salvation"*, 196-197.

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one of the most influential Catholic women of the 20th century, Dorothy Day. Writing in a very different era with unpredictable social conditions, Day's approach to the Social Gospel was immensely different from that of Rauschenbusch; however, like Rauschenbusch, Day's life and work significantly impacted Christianity within the United States. Even to the present day her ministry resonates throughout Christianity.

Dorothy Day, with the influence of her mentor Peter Maurin, advocated for the poor and lived in voluntary poverty, which was the manifestation of her incarnational theology. Her call to Christians and their lifestyles was to understand that what they have is not theirs. Therefore, Christians are free to give unto others. The greatest thing Christians can give, however, is not their money or goods but themselves. Day wholeheartedly believed a Christian's responsibility was giving up one's money and goods in order to be with others, particularly the poor. This was Day's expression of incarnational theology. Just as Jesus stripped himself to become flesh and live with others of the flesh, so too are Christians called to strip themselves and dwell with those whom society fails to see as people of the same flesh. Day agreed with Peter Maurin when she stated, "Voluntary poverty is the answer. We cannot see our brother in need without stripping ourselves. It is the only way we have of showing our love."⁹

Already striking similarities as well as disconnects appear between Day and Rauschenbusch. The importance of lowering or stripping oneself in order to be with brothers and sisters who are impoverished is not a theme found in Rauschenbusch. He was much more focused on the transformation of the individual that will result in a societal transformation. Day's focus was on transformation, but in a different context and for a different audience than that of Rauschenbusch. She emphasized being with anyone who was hurting, especially those in poverty, which she hoped would produce transformation for the privileged and possibly even the poor. Yet, the necessity of love is a constant factor in both thinkers' theologies.

The poor and poverty are the central focuses of Day's theology and ministry. Commenting on poverty, Day expressed her perplexing feelings by noting that, "I condemn poverty and I advocate it; poverty is simple and complex at once; ...Poverty is an elusive thing, and a paradoxical one."¹⁰ Even though Day was an ardent supporter of voluntary poverty, she was confusing at times. Unlike Rauschenbusch, who desired a Christianized world where all live equally, Day advocated for the wealthy to become impoverished and the impoverished to rise to a better condition. Day seems to have held a dualistic stance on poverty. For those in poverty, it is a fatal injustice out of which the impoverished might rise. However, for those not in poverty, it is an essential state of living that must be endured. Although her feelings on poverty are confounding, Day's feelings toward the people living in poverty are not. She boldly stated that she "felt keenly that God was more on the side of the hungry, the ragged, the unemployed, than on the side of the comfortable churchgoers who gave so little heed to the misery of the needy and the groaning of the poor."¹¹ Yet, Day's view toward the poor and poverty is a

⁹ Day, Dorothy. *Loaves and Fishes*. Maryknoll, (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 86.

¹⁰ Day 71

¹¹ Day 13

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glimpse of her theology of the Kingdom of God, where “the last shall be first and the first last.” While both Day and Rauschenbusch desired social progression, Day was determined to make the social movement happen by becoming the champion of the poor, just as Christ was and still is.

The Modern Day Impact of the Social Gospel

Rauschenbusch and Day are both crucial figures to the Social Gospel movement, and their distinctive differences add to their importance. What makes them paramount to the movement is not only their work and ministry during their lives, but their continued influence on some of the leading theologians of the 21st century, especially those who have a social influence on the millennial generation. Many of these theologians and/or pastors stem from the evangelical tradition, which has developed a strong interest in social matters in the last 15 years. Within the last five or so years the primary focus has been on social justice, a term that is so trendy and righteous today that nearly every Christian is “passionate” about it. Two of these young, leading social-activist theologians and pastors are Shane Claiborne and Eugene Cho, both of whom have been impacted by the Social Gospel movement and influenced by the likes of Day and Rauschenbusch among others.

Shane Claiborne has undoubtedly been influenced by Dorothy Day. The inspiration is revealed in Claiborne’s theology of interdependence and downward mobility, which strongly resembles Day’s voluntary poverty. An alumnus of Princeton Theological Seminary, Claiborne has a strong academic background in addition to his extraordinary life experiences. Claiborne has also been deeply influenced by one of the most inspiring Catholic women in the 20th century, Mother Teresa, with whom Claiborne spent a summer in Calcutta. Claiborne is one of the founding members of the Simple Way, a faith community in inner city Philadelphia that has aided in spreading and linking radical faith communities all over the globe, which certainly mirrors Day and the Catholic Worker movement. Claiborne released his first major book *The Irresistible Revolution* in 2006 and wrote in response to his experiences of the poor in both inner city Philadelphia and Calcutta, which is why he is able to relate to Day so well concerning her views of the poor. Yet, Claiborne has his own theology of the Social Gospel that differs from both Day and Rauschenbusch.

Claiborne is a strong supporter of power equalization between the rich and the poor. First, it is important to note that Claiborne’s perspective is that the poor are blessed, poverty exists from societal sin, and the poor are neighbors, which means they require more than what is considered charity by today’s standards. The Beatitudes in Luke 6 clearly state that the poor are blessed because they are heirs to the Kingdom of God.¹² Claiborne is in complete agreement with this statement and notes the Christian response ought to be “to surround ourselves with those whom God promises to bless and then we need not ask

¹² NRSV Luke 6:20

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God's blessing."¹³ Yet, Christians have a power struggle in that they are unwilling to give up their power to bring about social change. Many Christians, Claiborne believes, are certain they can bring about social change by using their power and not losing any of it. Yet Christ calls his followers to bring about change by equalizing power, which means those who have power must lose some of it. This is the call of downward mobility.¹⁴ Some may counter that the poor are poor from their own sin and mistakes; however, Claiborne wants to challenge that notion with the concept that, "people are poor not just because of their sins; they are poor because of our sins."¹⁵ Therefore, all of Christianity and even humanity is responsible for downward mobility.

There are many resemblances between Claiborne and Rauschenbusch's theologies of the Kingdom of God. These similarities fall on the importance of social health and connectedness. However, Rauschenbusch believed that Christianization would spread to all, causing a massive movement that would bring social regeneration, a grand transformation that would accomplish unimaginable feats. Claiborne, on the other hand, is fearful of growing too vast or aiming at weighty accomplishments. In this respect Claiborne is much more like Day. In fact, he notes, "our goal should be not to get larger and larger but smaller and smaller... God is indeed taking over the world, but it is happening through little acts of love."¹⁶ Continuity between Day and Claiborne is evident in these "little acts of love" that will eventually bring the completion of the Kingdom. Regardless of how it will come about and what theological perspectives they hold, the Kingdom of God is what all three are working toward. Each of them desires nothing more than for others to be working toward it also, whether through little acts of love or by regenerating all of society.

Lastly, Eugene Cho is the senior pastor at Quest Church, a large congregation that is part of the Evangelical Covenant Church. Cho, a native of Seoul, Korea, immigrated to the United States with his parents when he was young. Also a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary, Cho has an impressive entrepreneurial history. By the age of 44, Cho had planted Quest Church, started the nonprofit organization One Day's Wages, and had even begun an innovative nonprofit coffee shop called Q Café. Cho has a large presence among millennials because of his entrepreneurial background and ardent passion for social justice. The key question of his book and also his criticism of this present generation is "are we more in love with the idea of changing the world than actually changing the world?"¹⁷ Cho asks if there is reason to believe that those interested in the work of justice are overrated and not committed to the tenacious work of world-changing. That is the question from which his theology flows. His theology, though arguably shallower in comparison to the previous three social activists, could certainly be identified as a modern take on Social Gospel theology.

¹³ Claiborne, Shane. *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2006) 219.

¹⁴ Claiborne, Shane. "Downward Mobility in an Upscale World." *The Other Side*, November 1, 2000, 4.

¹⁵ Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution*, 152.

¹⁶ Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution*, 322.

¹⁷ Cho, Eugene. *Overrated: Are We More in Love with the Idea of Changing the World than Actually Changing the World?* 1st ed. (Colorado Springs: David C Cook), 2014, 37

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The present and constant work of justice, which ushers in the Kingdom of God, is central to the theology of Cho, much like it is for Rauschenbusch. Justice for Cho is an imperative Christian responsibility. Doing justice is not enough, however. Christians must also live justly. “Justice,” Cho explains, “is the act of restoring something to fullness after it has been harmed.”¹⁸ Living justly is one’s pursuit of justice and consequently restores one’s broken self in the process. A Christian’s responsibility then must be both, which is logical seeing how one cannot authentically be done without the other. Cho contests that, “To be followers of Jesus, we are required to pursue justice and live justly at the same time.”¹⁹ Furthermore, he goes even farther, saying, “I believe you cannot credibly follow Christ unless you pursue justice.”²⁰ These bold statements brightly illuminate Cho’s unwavering claim that justice is as crucial to Christianity as Christ himself.

Cho also focuses on the incarnation much like Day. For both of these social influencers, this concept is a major element of the gospel. Day would most certainly be in agreement with Cho, who explicates that “this is the gospel: The good news is not merely that Jesus saves but that Jesus is with us.”²¹ Therefore, incarnational theology is an eminent element of the gospel; something both Day and Cho proudly proclaim. So, if Christ is the example of what it means to do justice, then justice includes being with and being present among those who are broken and in need of restoring. Justice is a social movement, yet it is also immensely focused on the individual who is the victim of injustice. Since justice is a characteristic of God, “In doing justice and in doing things that matter to God, we actually grow more in His likeness.”²² When Christians pursue justice, they grow in the likeness of God, according to Cho. Consequently, the Kingdom of God will continue to form as justice is pursued and God’s creation is redeemed, restored, and reconciled to what God intends it to be.

The Social Gospel and Millennials

Yet, the question remains, has the Social Gospel and its influence on modern theological thinking shaped the mannerisms or behaviors of the millennial generation? Cho states that “It will take a generation or two for the new social comprehension of religion to become common property.”²³ Surely, that means that by the third and fourth generation the Social Gospel would be common knowledge and millennials would be doing the work it commanded. It is likely impossible to know if the millennial generation’s action or lack thereof is in direct response to the Social Gospel. There are no surveys that show a direct causation or correlation among millennials’ service or civic engagement and the Social Gospel. Nor is there research that seeks to find how much of a millennial’s theology derives from the Social Gospel movement. However, I do believe there are

¹⁸ Cho, Eugene. *Overrated: Are We More in Love with the Idea of Changing the World than Actually Changing the World?* 1st ed. (Colorado Springs: David C Cook), 2014, 37.

¹⁹ Cho 38

²⁰ Cho 43

²¹ Cho 121

²² Cho 51

²³ Cho 40.

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some inferences that can be made from a plethora of research done on millennials. In no way does this research directly answer the question of what the impact of the Social Gospel has been. It does, however, allow for an analysis of the civic engagement and social health of the millennial generation in comparison to Social Gospel theology as defined by a diverse group of theologians. No one can be sure if these theological perspectives resulted in behavior reflected by the millennial generation, but nevertheless it is challenging and fascinating to speculate.

Rauschenbusch noted that the Kingdom of God is a society based on service, equality, and love. The response of millennials in implementing this optimistic society with regards to service shows mixed results; some positive and some disconcerting. On the one side, the 2013 Millennial Impact Report, with research conducted by Achieve, highlights that 73 percent of millennials volunteered for a nonprofit in 2012.²⁴ This percentage does not give any insight to whether or not the volunteering was only once or continuous to some degree. It also does not tell what kind of work they did. Regardless, it does tell us that nearly three-fourths of all millennials have been exposed to serving in some capacity. The report goes on to say that more than 75 percent of those who volunteered did so because they were passionate about the cause.²⁵ Therefore, it can be inferred that millennials do serve, especially when the cause is something they feel passionate toward. On the other side, however, the Millennial Civic Health Index reports that less than 21 percent of millennials ages 18-29 volunteer in their local community.²⁶ With this shockingly low percentage, the mystery is why millennials are not passionate about serving their community.

It seems that if millennials become more passionate about serving their local community, there is a greater chance of communities reaching equality through the increase of service. The answers to why millennials are not serving their local communities are not clear-cut, but there are a few trends that provide insight. The 2013 Millennial Impact Report shares the information that, “Millennials first support causes they are passionate about (rather than institutions), so it’s up to organizations to inspire them and show them that their support can make a tangible difference on the wider issue.”²⁷ This insight should ignite communities and their local organizations to inspire their millennials to become passionate about local causes that need support. Furthermore, communities must show millennials how they can make a significant impact toward those causes. Many local causes do not appear as attractive as international nonprofit efforts. Global justice work such as stopping sex trafficking, or providing wells, or meals, or education is more appealing to millennials than their local United Way or Habitat for Humanity. Yet, if communities kindle a passion in millennials to support their local neighbors as much as they support their global neighbors, this would undoubtedly raise the level of service millennials do in their local communities, which could bring about a greater sense of equality and further the implementation of a just society.

²⁴ Feldmann, Derrick. *The 2013 Millennial Generation*. The Case Foundation, 2013, 28.

²⁵ Feldmann, *The 2013 Millennial Generation*, 28

²⁶ National Conference on Citizenship, *Millennial Civic Health Index*. 2013, 12.

²⁷ Feldmann, *The 2013 Millennial Generation*, 5

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Millennials however, are polarized about the equalization of wealth and power, which is emphasized in both Day's and Claiborne's theologies. For instance, millennials understand that inequality of wealth and power exists within our current capitalistic system. The Millennial Values Survey reports that, "nearly three-quarters (73%) of college-age Millennials agree that the economic system in this country unfairly favors the wealthy."²⁸ This notion strongly resonates with Claiborne and his theological perspective on the relationship between the rich and the poor. Yet, Claiborne questions if Christian millennials are willing to practice downward mobility in order to bring about the social equalization of wealth and power between rich and poor.

In opposition, it also must be noted that millennials are about the business of giving, especially to causes that inspire them.²⁹ In terms of giving, millennials show more hope. Over the past three years, giving by millennials has steadily increased. From 2011 to 2012, giving to nonprofits by millennials increased 5 percent from 75 percent to 80 percent. In 2013 that number made a larger increase of 7 percent among millennials who are employed.³⁰ This demonstrates millennials are willing to give financial support in order to bring about a better sense of equality. However, Claiborne and Day are both very critical of charity, which is all too often distant acts that never allow for solidarity with the receivers of the charitable giving. Theologians of the Social Gospel would contend that Christians are to move past the common conception of charity and toward concrete actions of love. Claiborne emphasizes this point by stating that, "when we get to heaven... I don't believe Jesus is going to say, 'When I was hungry, you gave a check to the United Way and they fed me' or 'When I was naked, you donated to the Salvation Army and they clothed me.' Jesus is not seeking distant acts of charity. He is seeking concrete actions."³¹ Millennials do give, but the theologies of social gospellers, like Day and Claiborne, challenge all people to go beyond just a financial gift. True acts of love require introductions and relationships.

Relationships are crucial not only for transformation of individuals, but also for the social health of a community. Social health is a central theme in many social gospellers' theology, most notably Rauschenbusch and Claiborne. Much of social health can be related to trust. If one trusts one's neighbors it is likely that the connectedness of a community is higher, resulting in better social health. High social health is a potentially strong indication of a community focused on love. Therefore, in communities there must be trust among neighbors in order for a society to be founded upon love. Yet, the Millennial Civic Health Index indicates that only 33.5 percent of millennials trust most of their neighbors.³² Less than 10 percent report that they trust all of their neighbors.³³ If neighbors do not trust each other, then forming and cultivating relationships is an

²⁸ Cox, Daniel, and Jones, Robert P., and Banchoff, Thomas. *A Generation in Transition. Religion, Values, and Politics among College-Age Millennials*. Washington D.C.: Public Religion Research Institute, and Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs. 2012, 2.

²⁹ Feldmann, Derrick. *The 2012 Millennial Impact Report*. Case Foundation, 2012, 26

³⁰ Feldmann, Derrick. *Inspiring the Next Generation Workforce: The 2014 Millennial Generation*. Case Foundation, 2014, 21.

³¹ Claiborne, *Downward Mobility*, 12.

³² *Millennial Civic Health Index*, 10.

³³ *Millennial Civic Health Index*, 10.

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impossibility, which is in direct opposition to creating a just society. It is clear that in terms of social health and connectedness, the millennial generation greatly struggles in comparison to the eschatological goal of the Social Gospel.

While there may not be a survey that explores the amount of concrete actions of love millennials do toward others, there is research to show that millennials are less socially, civically, and religiously engaged. For instance, millennials in comparison to previous generations are less likely to give to charities, even though their giving has increased over recent years. Furthermore, millennials are less likely to desire a career that is helpful to society or to others, or to take less food in order for there to be more food for those starving.³⁴ Additionally, millennials are less likely to think about social problems, vote, and become involved in boycotts or demonstrations.³⁵ Although millennials may be giving some of their money and time to causes, one can infer that millennials are less socially minded and less willing to take social action in comparison to previous generations. Maybe Cho has it right that my generation is one of the most overrated generations in American history.

This research supports the notion that the Social Gospel influences some current socially-active theologians, but the teachings of this movement are not manifested in the entirety of the millennial generation. It seems as though Rauschenbusch's prophecy of social religion becoming known to all may need a few more generations. However, millennials are making some effort to bring about a society founded upon service, equality, and love. Although I do not agree with Cho that the millennial generation is the most overrated generation in human history, I do believe millennials must be more attentive to the different theologies of the Social Gospel. Rauschenbusch, Day, Claiborne and Cho present a perspective that would encourage millennials to be more religiously, socially, and civically engaged. Most importantly, these theologies call for the love of both the person and humanity in order to bring about a just society. If millennials are going to be the generation that "stops talking and starts doing," as Howe and Strauss claim, then the Social Gospel offers motivation to begin the movement.

³⁴ Twenge, Jean M., W. Keith Campbell, and Elise C. Freeman. "Generational Differences in Young Adults' Life Goals, Concern for Others, and Civic Orientation, 1966–2009." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*: 1054.

³⁵ Twenge et al., *Generational Differences*, 1056.

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