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Got Ethics?

How History Has Shaped Us

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*Got Ethics?***

Envisioning and Evaluating the Future of Our Guild and Discipline,
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I have the history assignment, and I am going to begin with the founding of social ethics in the Social Gospel movement. Social ethics began in the 1870s with white Social Gospel ministers who talked about worker ownership and black Social Gospel ministers who imagined a new

abolition. In 1906, John Ryan launched an American Catholic tradition of social Christianity with his landmark book on a living wage.

Social ethics has a long history of struggling awkwardly with the problem of power, and today there is no significant movement or strategy to replace the predatory logic of capitalism. There is only the necessity of creating one through the struggles of thousands of disparate organizations and communities. For the injustices that gave rise to Socialist movements still abound, still matter, and exist among new crises threatening the survival of the planet. Even the hope of merely restraining the destructive impulses of corporate capitalism has been left to stubborn types who refuse to accept that there is no alternative.

Social ethics began with the rise of modern social consciousness. It was not a coincidence that the Social Gospel, social ethics, sociology, socialism, and the ideas of social structure, social salvation, and social justice all arose at the same time; also corporate capitalism and the trade unions. In the Social Gospel, society became a subject of redemption. Social justice became intrinsic to salvation. If there was such a thing as social structure, salvation had to be conceptualized as personal *and social* to be saving. The key to the Social Gospel was its novel claim that Christianity has a social ethical mission to transform the structures of society in the direction of social justice. The founders of social ethics tried to get there by espousing democracy, progress, rationality, good will, and the peaceable way of Christ. Usually they avoided talking about power, because power smacked of monarchical theology, oppression, aggressive self-assertion, and especially, the violence of war. But the commitments to democracy and economic justice that defined the Social Gospel drew social ethicists into the hard-edged

sphere of power. Moreover, these commitments opened out to an understanding of power that was always in the Social Gospel: power as inclusive transformative capacity, the ability to achieve a purpose.

In the black Social Gospel and among latter-day white abolitionists such as Albion Tourgee and Mary White Ovington, the Social Gospel gave highest priority to the struggle against racial tyranny. In mainline white Protestantism, the early Social Gospel gave highest priority to the problems of industrialization and poverty. In both cases, ministers responded to the accusation that the churches did not care about the struggles of poor and oppressed people. The Social Gospel was fundamentally a response to that accusation.

There was a social Christian mainstream that was proudly middle-class, reformist, optimistic, and moralistic. It supported the Progressive movement and cooperatives, and sometimes it supported trade unions and municipal Socialism. Notable figures in this line included Washington Gladden, Francis Greenwood Peabody, Graham Taylor, Jane Addams, Richard R. Wright Jr., John Ryan, and Shailer Mathews. There was a left flank that spoke the customary language of progressive idealism while advocating Christian Socialism or radical economic democracy. They included Walter Rauschenbusch, Harry Ward, Vida Scudder, Reverdy Ransom, George Woodbey, George Herron, Albion Tourgée, W. D. P. Bliss, and Kirby Page.

Some figures in the latter group advocated a Social Democratic fulfillment of social contract liberalism, construing power as an exchangeable thing to be managed by good politics. Others were straightforwardly Marxist in construing power as a commodity that is quantified, bought, owned, given, exchanged, or stolen. In both cases, Social Gospel radicals contended that

economic justice was the precondition of individual opportunity. Debates over pacifism were not field dividing during the heyday of the Social Gospel; the politically liberal and radical wings of the Social Gospel both had numerous pacifists and non-pacifists. The dividing issue pitted liberal idealists, who spurned class analysis and did not want to talk about power, against Social Gospel radicals, who fixated precisely on democratizing power.

Social Gospel radicals did not say that middle-class idealism could transform society. Rauschenbusch said emphatically that idealists alone had never achieved *any* social justice cause. Rauschenbusch said exactly what E. P. Thompson famously said 50 years later--that class “happens” when socially awakened workers “make” it. Class is made when exploited people feel and articulate their interests in distinction from other classes, and justice is made when they fight for their rights. Walter Rauschenbusch worked hard at persuading his church-going readers not to dread the Wobblies--the anarcho-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World. I don’t know many theologians who write like that, which is why I am stubborn about reminding people that a century ago there was such a thing as radical social Christianity.

In Catholicism, the dominant power was the dogmatic mythology of a priestly class. In Protestantism it was the financial and cultural power of a ruling capitalist class. The law is on the side of the capitalists, Rauschenbusch would say, because they made it.

Reinhold Niebuhr, when pressed on the question, sometimes admitted that the Social Gospel had advocates who were not squishy, moralistic, optimistic, and averse to power politics. But whenever Niebuhr wrote on this subject, he opted for ridicule. Liberals were stupid, he said.

Liberal idealism made them stupid. Politics is about struggling for power. Human groups never willingly subordinate their interests to the interests of others.

Niebuhr took most of the field of social ethics with him, moving, as he put it, to the left politically and the right theologically. A decade later he joined the Democratic Party establishment and stopped writing about economic justice—which is a pretty good summary of the field that he influenced. The Social Gospel tried to moralize the public square and it taught that a cooperative commonwealth is achievable. Niebuhr replied that politics is a struggle for power and that the very idea of a good society must be given up. He got the first thing right and the second thing wrong and we've been struggling with the legacy of both in Christian ethics ever since.

Niebuhr's ethics and politics remained captive to the dominant order, restricted to marginal reforms. The borders of possibility remained untested under his realism, which was an ideology of the U.S. American establishment. His realism was a brake on his own critique of racism, and he spouted typical white American rot about Euro-American superiority and the cultural inferiority of black Americans. Niebuhr's stark dichotomizing between love and justice rendered the teaching of Jesus as irrelevant to these issues, and to social ethics as a whole. But the later Niebuhr realized that his stark dichotomizing misconstrued his own career in social ethics. The love ethic kept him in the struggle, whether or not he succeeded. *That* was its relevance.

Social justice is an application of the law of love to the sociopolitical sphere, and love is the motivating energy of the struggle for justice. The meaning of justice cannot be taken directly

from the principles of equality, freedom, and order. It is determined only in the interaction of love and situation, through the mediation of the principles of equality, freedom, and order. Love is uncalculating concern for the dignity of persons; as such it asserts no interests. But because love motivates concern for the dignity of persons, it also motivates a passion for justice overflowing with interests and requiring principles of justice. To say it in a way that Niebuhr never quite managed: The love ethic is always the point, the motive, and the end, even when it lacks a concrete meaning. Love is not merely the content of an impossible ethical ideal. Love makes you care, makes you angry, throws you into the struggle, keeps you in it, helps you face another day.

From the beginning of social ethics to the present day, some social ethicists have implored that we have no field if we have no distinct method or subject. Francis Greenwood Peabody was the apostle of that argument, and his successors included John Ryan, Harry Ward, John Bennett, Walter Muelder, Gibson Winter, Bev Harrison, and Jim Gustafson. Today, Lisa Cahill, Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Robin Lovin, Dan Maguire, Bill Schweiker, and Charlie Curran are leading theorists in this vein. I devoted hundreds of pages in *Social Ethics in the Making* to variations of this argument, and I think it is true to say that we would have no field without the work of these figures. Social ethicists have to worry about the disciplinary standing of the field.

But from the beginning, social ethics was not like other fields in this respect. Social ethics came out of the Social Gospel, not the other way around. It was deeply, even inherently, interdisciplinary, crossing boundaries wherever its activism led. Social ethics grew out of the old moral philosophy, which had a long run in American colleges. For thirty years, social ethicists

tried to provide a moral underpinning for the emerging social sciences, opposing the lust for specialization that always began by getting rid of ethics. Social ethics turned out to be too squishy and ethical to have a future in what became sociology, criminology, social psychology, economics, political science, and even, incredibly, social work, but it won a home in divinity schools and religion departments, where two kinds of performers prevailed.

One sought to shore up the disciplinary standing of the field, often within theology, or moral theology, or religion and society, or the like. The other kind of social ethicist plunged straight into social issues of the moment, contending, with equal justification, that social ethics got its bearings and earned its place by responding to whatever crisis demanded a response. In social ethics, you didn't have to steer through Jeremiah or Gregory of Nyssa before you took up the war in Vietnam or healthcare policy or Ferguson. Here it is legitimate to aim straight for the crisis, because a curriculum in theology or religious studies should have such a place. That describes many of the bellwether figures in our field. Some were actually trained in social ethics, some belonged to other fields, and some were not academics of any kind. But we recognize the headliners: Rauschenbusch, Jane Addams, Richard Wright Jr., Dorothy Day, Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Luther King, Jr., Cornel West.

Today, as in previous generations, some ethicists work hard at straddling the divide between social justice activism and disciplinary scholarship. Tonight's panel consists entirely of ethicists fitting this description. All of us up here work hard at doing both things and we struggle with the trade-offs of doing so.

I have completed my assignment and my time is up, but I have a cautionary conclusion. Unlike previous generations of social ethicists, we cannot assume that our field has a future. The existence of our field is in jeopardy except in Catholic institutions. On the road I have talked with many academic administrators who are skeptical that their schools need to teach anything called Christian ethics or comparative religious ethics or social ethics. We cannot settle for merely asserting that our work is relevant and that our field has an established standing. The weight of presumption is shifting against us. The field is shrinking, and we must prove that our work is substantial and relevant.