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Towards a New Social Gospel

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Topic: How would Walter Rauschenbusch have approached the problem of poverty in today's America? How does his approach to the social gospel inform our understanding and our action on these issues in today's context? From a biblical and theological perspective, what is the role of government; what is the role of the private sector; and what is the role of the church, in assuring that the basic needs of low-income Americans are met?

Circles of compassion

All around me

cries for help

go unspoken.

Not victims faraway –

but persons near at hand –

family and friends and the stranger

near at hand – like me –

Are joined in silence –

forbidden to express their need.

Can someone hear them?

A single mother struggling

to educate her teens

calls for help, silently.

A man loses his job

and is too embarrassed

to speak..

He calls for help, silently. ...

A child struggles

with challenges too great

for her few years

is calling for help,

silently.

Justice denied in

the corridors of power

is calling out for help.

**Lovers of Peace
surrounded by
deserts of violence
cry out for help
Do you hear these cries?
Listen carefully.**

**Do you hear
the sound of caring
in the beating
of our hearts?**

**Listen to the sound of caring,
listen to the earth's song
we are meant to sing
here and now.**

**May we unite
in circles of compassion
in communities of hope
and free ourselves
of the prison
of indifference.**

**Kwami Nyamidie
Feb 2, 2003.**

Towards a New Social Gospel

Introduction

Imagine Walter Rauschenbusch touring America today! He would be pleasantly surprised at the poverty fighting programs he would find in every church he visits.[1] He would be satisfied that his emphasis on the Kingdom of God as the centrality of the Christian message is the basis of many scholarly works.[2] His Social Gospel concept has become a cultural phenomenon. Rauschenbusch Centers have risen across the country. His ideas are being revived. [3]

But he would also be deeply disappointed. The deep roots of poverty are not being considered when assistance to the poor is offered. Private not for profit organizations and faith-based institutions stretched thin still have so much work to do to eliminate poverty. Labor unions are gradually losing their influence. [4] Government policies are failing to arrest the trend of inequality. The task of helping the poor is an enormous one. As a result, he would encourage us to continue the good work we are doing, to not rest on our laurels, and to keep the flame of justice burning. He would ask us, above all, to continue to listen to the silent cries for help from the poor that go unheard. Just as he heard it when he was the pastor of the Hell's Kitchen in New York City where he discovered his life's purpose.

... I saw how men toiled all their life long, hard toilsome lives, and at the end had almost nothing to show for it; how strong men begged for work and could not get it in the hard times; how little children died--oh, the children's funerals! they gripped my heart--that was one of the things I always went away thinking about--why did the children have to die? . . . [A] single little human incident of that sort is enough to set a great beacon fire burning, and to light up the whole world for you. . . . And in that way, gradually, social information and social passion came to me.[5]

Rauschenbusch and social awareness

Rauschenbusch observed the pain and suffering of people he came into contact with. It was this awareness that informed his social action. Social action seeds are sown only with an awareness of a dissatisfying situation. Awareness is the source of all forms of social transformation. It formed the basis of Joseph Cardigan's Christian Youth Movement in which

young Christian workers were to “observe, judge, act.” [6] Observation and the awareness that it breeds, is at the root of Paulo Freire’s “conscientization” which is a way to perceive “social, political, and economic contradictions” [7.]

This process of observation that leads to action, exemplified in the life of Walter Rauschenbusch, is one of the most important lessons that can inform the social action of today’s Church. There can be no social action without an awareness leading to a commitment to transformation.

Church response to poverty and service according to Raushenbush

I volunteered with about twenty members in my church this summer in the Interfaith Association of Snohomish County program that assists homeless men, women, and children. My church hosted two families-- a husband and wife who were both in their late twenties with three little girls who were under four years, and a single mother with her teenage daughter. Participating religious groups in the interfaith coalition took turns hosting these two families in need for about a week.

These two families are examples of the human faces of the poverty that plagues America today. For these homeless families faith based communities are serving “as the first line of the last frontier of social care” in their desperate need for something “to eat, a safe place to sleep or care for their children” [8] Every day, faith communities all over America serve millions of people like these families. Although they may not use the same language, the Interfaith Association of Snohomish County seems to speak for most faith based American social concerns organizations when it affirms in its statement of purpose: “We seek those issues and beliefs that unite rather than divide. Service to others is one of the main tenets found in all faiths. Although we worship in different ways, we all love God and strive to show that love through service to our community” [9]

Rauschenbusch taught that this kind of selfless service to others was true salvation. In *Theology for the Social Gospel* he wrote: “Complete salvation, therefore, would consist in an attitude of love in which he [the Christian] would freely co-ordinate his life with the life of his fellows in obedience to the loving impulses of the spirit of God, thus taking his part in a divine organism of mutual service.” [10]. Moreover, helping and relating well with others is a way of

sanctification “The way of holiness through human fellowship and service is slower and lowlier, but its results are more essentially Christian” [11]. This is because “The life of Jesus was a life of love and service.”[12].

Self-forgetting service to others, then, is the hallmark of religious organizations. This congregational imitation of Christ’s love and service has been going on for some time but it is only recently that the social welfare contributions of faith-based initiatives have caught the attention of scholars. Current scholarly studies bring to light how these religious congregations are beginning to live some aspects of the vision of the church as the Kingdom of God that Walter Rauschenbusch taught and wrote about. From Chicago to San Francisco, Seattle to Philadelphia in 2002, faith communities received \$ 84.28 billion in donations much of which was dedicated to community based welfare services. [13]

Ram A. Cnaan and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania studied 251 congregations nationwide. They found out that American congregations whom they christened “Invisible hands” offer five forms of service to the poor. These include “informal services” such as counseling, addressing needs of members and non-members as they arise and referring them to professionals. “On-site congregational programs” involve giving out clothes and food. “Off-site congregational programs” are about visiting the sick, the elderly and prisoners. In “on-site non-congregational programs” faith communities host social service programs of other groups on their premises. In “non-congregational programs” they support welfare associations such as Habitat for Humanity. [14]

These activities demonstrate that faith based communities have understood their fundamental responsibility of addressing poverty in their communities. They reflect the image of God revealed in the Psalms:

“Because the poor are despoiled,
Because the needy groan,
I will now rise up,” says the LORD;
“I will place them in the safety for which they long.” [15]

Moreover, it is clear that most Christian churches in America have understood the basic New Testament teachings of Jesus Christ. He emphasized the primacy of compassionate dealing with others. He required that repentance for the rich should involve caring for the needy “When you give a banquet, invite the poor, crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed,

because they cannot repay you...” [16] To stand when He appears on the Day of Judgment, Jesus asks us to satisfy the material needs of those who are hungry, strangers, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned. [17] The first Christians exemplified these teachings in their lives so that “there was not a needy person among them” [18] as the “giver, in generosity” [19] was considered a gift to the new church.

Poverty is a hydra-headed monster

Although churches have understood the message of compassion that involves service to the materially deprived, poverty is a hydra headed monster. If it has a head called homelessness, it also has other frightening ones called fear, powerlessness and political alienation. The World Bank Group adds to our understanding of poverty when it says on its web site:

Poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not being able to go to school and not knowing how to read. Poverty is not having a job, is fear for the future, living one day at a time. Poverty is losing a child to illness brought about by unclean water. Poverty is powerlessness; lack of representation and freedom [20]

Poverty then is material deprivation, ignorance, unemployment, emotional anguish for an uncertain future, and powerlessness that comes from exclusion from participatory government at all levels of the society. In the light of this definition of poverty, faith-based communities in America today still have a long way to go in their fight against poverty. In general, faith-based organizations are not as politically involved, as they should be in seeking social justice. The clergy tend to “focus more on helping and even changing the person in need than on changing the environment in which the person lives.” [21]. Thus, only few congregations have found practical and effective ways to initiate action that will “change the power structure or economic distribution in society” which is ultimately the best way to eliminate poverty. Like Jerry Falwell, many Christians “would find it impossible to stop preaching the pure saving gospel of Jesus Christ and begin doing anything else—including fighting Communism, or participating in civil rights reforms.” [22]

The Social Gospel message of Walter Rauschenbusch informs us that assisting the poor in the immediate material needs is only a first step. He wanted the Church to understand that

moral lassitude is not the main cause of poverty among his parishioners.. It was the “industrial machine”, “injustice and oppression” that lay at the root of poverty.[23] Social factors and injustice can impoverish people. Today’s church seems to ignore this need for social analysis that reveal poverty as negative effects of power relations, unjust and oppressive economic structures.

The captivity of the Israelites in Egypt and their liberation by Moses is a metaphor for social justice. Moses would have adopted a few suffering Israelites and he would have given them food and protection. But Pharaoh would have continued to oppress millions of Israelites. True liberation of the Israelites involved a collective social action. Moses had to lead his people from oppression and injustice to the Promise Land.

The various forms of assistance that most faith based congregations offer fail to address the problems that cause the poverty in the first place. Excessive emphasis has been placed on the improvement and changing of the individual. Many ministers have made fortunes writing what is generally considered the literature of success. But this kind of self-motivation books mostly justify the economic system by favoring an identification with the rising wealthy class and diverting attention from group action that will correct structural injustice.

The writings of Rauschenbusch inform us that individuals are powerless in addressing societal injustice. Social action is the answer to structural inequality that breeds poverty. Leaders of faith-based communities have to study the social context in which their congregants live to understand the root causes of the problems of poverty as well as the powerlessness that victims of poverty feel in extricating themselves from their plight.

The Hebrew Scriptures offer clues for creating a just community. About this quality of the Torah, Rauschenbusch wrote:

However our views of the Bible may change, every religious man will continue to recognize that to the elect minds of the Jewish people God gave so vivid a consciousness of the divine will that, in its main tendencies at least, their life and thought carries a permanent authority for all who wish to know the higher right of God. [24]

The elaborate laws God gave the Israelites for personal cleanliness, property and social interactions prepared the individual physically and spiritually to function in a just society. Individuals were interconnected and God’s law and love were the glue that cemented that bond.

To reinforce this bond, the prophets as an institution always reminded the Jewish people of their collective deliverance from Egypt as slaves.

If the Torah offered guidance for healthy interdependence, Jesus Christ exemplified what commitment to the group really meant. Walter Rauschenbusch had a profound admiration for the social action of Jesus Christ.

Jesus had realized the life of God in the soul of man and the life of man in the love of God. That was the real secret of his life, the well-spring of his purity, his compassion, his unwearied courage, his unquenchable idealism: he knew the Father. But if he had that greatest of all possessions, the real key to the secret of life, it was his highest social duty to share it and help others to gain what he had. He had to teach men to live as children in the presence of their Father, and no longer as slaves cringing before a despot. He had to show them that the ordinary life of selfishness and hate and anxiety and chafing ambition and covetousness is no life at all, and that they must enter into a new world of love and solidarity and inward contentment. [25]

Rauschenbusch found in Jesus Christ his model for social action. Jesus taught men that true life consists of charity and being the other's keeper. But solidarity cannot be achieved under oppression to any human kingdom. He proclaimed the Kingdom of God, as a contrast to the Roman Empire, which is the symbol of injustice and oppression. The notion of the Kingdom of God in the historical context was a subversive political statement. By indirectly comparing the existing government to the vision of Shalom when God would be King on the throne Jesus Christ invited his audience to think of what could have been if God were Israel's Sovereign Ruler instead of the Roman Emperors. When he stated that the Kingdom of God was within them Jesus Christ seemed to have implied that his audience should become aware of the possibilities they possessed to create the vision of the perfect government they wanted through collective action and divine intervention. [26] This concept of creating our vision of the world we want to live in through mutual interdependence is the unifying concept of the Social Gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch. It is what Christianity is all about. "The essential purpose of Christianity was to transform human society into the Kingdom of God re regenerating all human relations and reconstituting them in accordance with the will of God [27]

For every generation, therefore, the Social Gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch will always be relevant. This is because any reflection on the Social Gospel and his reinterpretation of the Kingdom of God ultimately leads to an inescapable question: “How close are we, here and now, to the vision of this Kingdom of God, characterized by a peaceful society of justice and abundance for all?” It is, thus, the duty of every generation to close the gap that separates their contemporary realities with this ideal. In contemporary America rising poverty is deepening the chasm the separates us from this vision.

The discovery of this chasm between this ideal of the Kingdom of God and the deplorable social conditions that massive industrialization created was the motivation of his social action. It was fueled by his personal experience and sustained by his vast knowledge of the forces of the Kingdom of the Evil with which he was contending. He obtained this knowledge through various avenues. He was influenced by the Liberal Theologians such as Albrecht Ritschl, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schleiermacher, H.C King, Washington Gladen and WA Brown. [28] Catholic transformationists like Frederick Denison Maurice and Charles Kingsley, Calvinist transformationists Leonhard Ragaz and Herman Kutter, Bull Moose and Emile de Laveleye, the Belgian economist influenced his socioeconomic ethics. [29] From these thinkers and movements they represented came six “formidable contributions to Rauschenbusch's ethics: a theology of social institutions, an economic interpretation of ethics, the value of socialism, the doctrine of progress, a historical perspective stressing the uniqueness of the new social concern, and an eclectic spirit.” [30] .It is important to demonstrate that Walter Rauschenbusch was influenced not only by his personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or his theological studies, but also from knowledge he gained through logical reasoning and the scientific discoveries of his time.

What does this mean for today’s church leaders? They will be encouraged to constantly educate themselves beyond the narrow confines of their theological training. This self-education would involve attending workshops, conferences and even traveling just as Rauschenbusch did, critical reading of books and having intellectual discussions with experts in fields of knowledge in which church leaders are not experts. Today, important areas of study that can empower church leaders in addition to a solid theological training include social psychology because of discoveries about human nature that contradict commonsense, international economics particularly arguments for and against globalization; political science as it relates to lobbying and

the legislative process, systems theory and decision making and how to use emerging technologies such as the Internet to mobilize people for collective action. This interdisciplinary knowledge base will empower leaders in their understanding of contemporary socio-economic issues. Informed decisions and proper action can only come from right information. Good intentions alone are insufficient to create social change. It is in our understanding of how the world works that we can renew the Social Gospel movement and adapt its basic philosophy to solving the contemporary problem of poverty as a church.

Rauschenbusch continually studied beyond the confines of Theology. This self-education informed him about the problems with which his parishioners contended: unjust treatment from the health care system, poverty, imperialism, urbanization and labor relations of a burgeoning capitalist society. He educated himself beyond his theological training. He asked that theology be constantly renewed. "If theology stops growing or is unable to adjust itself to its modern environment and to meet its present tasks, it will die,"[31]. As Joseph Fuchs the Catholic Theologian wrote we need to "translate the text" into the present tense in this case Rauschenbusch's Social Gospel into the present tense.

The Role of the Private Sector

This brings us to the role that private institutions and businesses should play in fighting poverty. The easy route would be to request companies to donate money to churches and social programs. Another temptation would be for faith based organizations to request endowments from big business and government. While funds and grants are important to run programs, financial support alone will not solve the structural problems of poverty. Some companies have found ways to fight poverty from its roots.

Southwest Airlines is one example. For more than thirty years as a company, Southwest Airlines has not laid off its workers. After the September 11 2001 attack and its economic fall-out, competing airlines laid off 20 percent of their staff. Some airline companies filed for bankruptcy. But Southwest airlines did not lay off even a single employee.

"We are willing to suffer some damage even to our stock market, to protect the jobs of our people," the CEO James F. Parker said. [33] In 2002, Southwest airlines announced hiring 4000 workers.

Southwest Airlines is one of a few companies in America today that consider layoffs as the final resort. S.C. Johnson and Pella is another company with a long tradition of no lay-offs.

In the Depression, rather than layoff the staff, workers washed windows over and over just to get something to do. Today, the following publicly traded companies have similar policies: FedEx, Lincoln Electric, AFLAC Erie Insurance, Nucor Brobeck, Phleger & Harrison. These companies did not layoff workers following the September 11 attack. As a result, they did not contribute to the poverty that a church or another governmental agency would have to address.

Many companies engage in business practices that are unfair. One of these practices involves hiring workers as temporary staff. To avoid paying them benefits, these employees are then laid off and recalled to avoid paying benefits to these workers. Some send the jobs offshore for cheap labor.

To be fair to these companies we need to understand why they do what they do. Private businesses are currently under immense pressure. In general most people blame “unfettered capitalism, the power of greed of global corporations and international finance, and sometimes the encroachments of immigrants, foreigners, and ethnic minorities” for poverty [34]. This blame, according to the former Labor Secretary, Robert Reich, is misplaced.. The real reason that most private companies are laying off people and are less and less socially involved lie elsewhere. “Corporations, capital flows, ...are responding to the widening range of choice open to consumers and investors around the world, the increasing ease with which all can switch to better deals, and the intensifying competition that results.” [p.249.]

In such a world of uncertainty, private businesses are under enormous strain to survive. We the consumers want cheaper products without regard to what is determining the prices of the goods. When we buy a cheaper foreign product we are unknowingly creating a situation where our homegrown company will go out of business. Thus churches should encourage members to buy products of local industries to help them survive the competition that ultimately ends up creating the poverty we want to curb.

Although companies are under enormous pressure, from the examples given about Southwest Airlines, corporations can contribute indirectly to the welfare of their communities by reducing their profits, creating just wages and positive work environments. That is, if they have the will. Sooner or later, each company will have to deal with transaction crisis as more and more consumers distrust them. [35] As they adopt these social concern policies, they should market the idea so that the community can support them.

It becomes obvious that just keeping their doors open, running their businesses ethically, companies help the community. For example, when an American company decides to not migrate its manufacturing plants to a Third World country for cheaper wages, or to not contract its jobs to foreign bidders, it is indeed fighting poverty. [36]

Government and poverty:

Governments can be powerful instruments in poverty reduction. Through good governance and just policies that create a healthy political and socio-economic environment, poverty can be reduced through economic development. Governments can also reduce poverty by working in concert with other governments to find common answers to common problems.

At the start of the millennium several world organizations came to the conclusion that poverty would be the main problem facing most countries in the years ahead. For example, at the United Nations September 2000 Millennium Summit, world leaders identified the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger as one of its Millennium Development goals. [37] As a response to the United Nation Secretary General's call to Action on Poverty and Economic Development Issues, the Clinton Administration sent out a press Release. The fact sheet mentioned US support for UN initiatives, US Agency for International Development efforts at ensuring child survival abroad, clean water, support for education, and debt relief. But it did not mention what the government would do to address the widening gap between the rich and the poor in the United States. This is understandable because at the time the press release came out, the United States was at the peak of its economic boom. "America is now richer than it has been at any time in its history—as measured by our domestic product divided by the number of our people, or by our total net worth divided by the number of people. We are richer than any nation in the history of the world." [38]

Unfortunately in 2001, America entered into a recession. And poverty became an issue of greater national concern. In December 2001, the Conference of Mayors' 27-City Survey revealed that hunger and homelessness have increased sharply. [39] The unemployment rate rose from 4.0 percent in 2000 to 6.2 percent in July 2003 with 9.1 million people out of work. [40] More and more people have into the poverty level since 2000.

According to the poverty report, about 1.3 million more people were poor in 2001 than in 2000 -- 32.9 million versus 31.6 million. The number of poor families increased from 6.4 million in 2000 (or 8.7 percent of all families, a record low rate) to 6.8 million (or 9.2 percent) in 2001. [41]

It is against this recessional economic background that the Bush Administration has started the Faith-Based and Community-Based Initiatives in which the government supports faith and community organizations, “Americas armies of compassion” [42] to fight poverty.

The establishment of this Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives has attracted criticism from the American public. Cnaan raises several questions about the initiative, which include, congregational capacity to deliver service required of them, first amendment concerns, impact on existing non-profit organizations, risk of applying exclusionary tactics in service delivery, continuity of assumed compassionate behavior and volunteerism when staff gets paid, impact of government funding on congregation as place of worship, and difficulty in program evaluation due to variability of services and programs funded. [43] The Cato Institute also criticized the initiative by charging that it would corrupt charity, as most large religious organizations already receive government grants without any fanfare. Michael Tanner Director of Health and Welfare Studies at the Cato Institute in the March 22 2001 article reports that Catholic Charities USA receives two-thirds of its annual funds while the Jewish Board of Family and Children Services receives seventy five percent of its funds from the US Government. There are already laws on the books that regulate funding of welfare programs by religious groups. [44]

One of the fears raised by Cnaan and other critics has already been reported. A 2.2 million grant was snatched away from children supporting programs and given to marriage promoting groups. [Stephen W. Potts’s article: “Faith-based initiatives and the Social Gospel”

But the initiative has received support from individuals and religious organizations. In August 2001, the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives issued a report titled “Unlevel Playing Field: Barriers to Participation by Faith-Based and Community Organizations in Federal Social Service Programs”. It made the case for the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives listing fifteen barriers that hinder the funding of faith-based and small organizations that help their communities. It concludes:

No faith-based service group has an automatic right to obtain Federal funding either through direct discretionary grants or through State and local governments' provision of Federal formula grants. Similarly, community-based organizations have no automatic right to Federal funding. But both faith-based and community organizations should have an equal opportunity to obtain such funding, if they choose to seek it. A sensible, results-driven policy requires the Government to examine outcomes—that is, what an organization achieves with the funds—rather than to the character of the organization. ...Because grassroots organizations, sacred and secular, are close to, and trusted by, communities, families, and individuals in need, the Federal grants process should welcome rather than discourage the contributions of such groups that offer effective programs.

The Federal Grants process, despite a few exceptions and a growing sensitivity to and openness toward both faith-based and community groups, does more to discourage than to welcome the participation of faith-based and community groups. ... Too much is done that discourages or actually excludes good organizations that simply appear “too religious”; too little is done to include groups that meet local needs with vigor and creativity but are not as large, established, or bureaucratic as the traditional partners of the Federal government. This is not the best way for government to fulfill its responsibilities to come to the aid of needy families, individuals, and communities. [46]

The Bush Administration believes that making it easier for faith based and community organizations to fund local grass-roots programs with federal funds is a way to meet the needs of needy families, individuals, and communities. While these organizations offer laudable service to their communities, government support for religious organizations that respond to the negative effects of government policies and structural injustice without addressing the root causes of poverty are finding only a short cut to the problems of the society.

Rather than setting up the Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives, government should implement the policies that America's leading economists have proposed for ending poverty. Richard B. Freeman is one of these progressive economists. His suggestions can form

the action plan for a government truly dedicated to ending poverty. Government should implement transfer of productive asset distributive strategy rather than income transfer, target intervention for the young, raise the social wage while taxing it progressively, promote organizations that promote employee welfare such as unions, and target metropolitan regions as the foundations for a more egalitarian [47]

The New Deal, as a response Franklin D. Roosevelt's Government to the depression, was inspired by the ideas the Social Gospel movement of Rauschenbusch. Many Americans suffered from the consequences of the depression, including those who used to believe that poverty was caused by personal flaw. For once, America was truly compassionate, because poverty was not construed as a consequence of moral flaw. It was obvious then that the poor were victims of their economic circumstances and they needed help to survive.

That is precisely what should inform our government from the Social Gospel Movement. Poverty in America today, for the most part, is a consequence of the forces beyond the individual's control. Just as rapid industrialization created slums and problems associated with urbanization and their attendant poverty to which the Social Gospel was a direct response, the problems of the new economy, globalization, technology, and service economy call for a New Social Gospel. Churches, the private sector and the Government all have a role to play. We can look to Walter Rauschenbusch for inspiration. We will adapt his concept of the Kingdom of God to our contemporary situation as we renew our faith in the establishment of a just world for all.

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