The Social Gospel Synthesis of Jane Addams and the Catholic Christian Response:

Competing Views of Charity and Their Implications

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The end of the 19th century was a time of philosophical dislocation. The modern period which had begun with Descartes and culminated in Nietzsche threatened the dogma, tradition, and realism of Catholic Christianity. Darwin’s theory of evolution had only grown in influence since its publication in 1859 and in many minds served as the final proof for the supremacy and power of materialistic science. Not unconnected to this development was the Comtian program of social science, which emphasized empirical research, statistics, and an overall imitation of the methods of the physical sciences, all for the purpose of improving the material condition of mankind and thrusting it into the “positive stage of history.” It followed, then, that education ought not to inculcate truth and doctrine (since science could at anytime overturn previously held beliefs) but foster a spirit of change and tolerance so that the “social organism” could adapt and grow as needed. The notion of a political philosophy grounded in natural-law theory fell entirely out of favor. Democracy ceased to be a means for securing individual rights and instead became the ultimate manifestation of society, capable of solving any and all problems with scientific government planning.¹

These changes did not go unnoticed by religious people and serious efforts were made to confront them. Jane Addams’ Twenty Years at Hull-House (1910) is regarded as an indispensable primary text among scholars of the Progressive Era, and her article therein, “The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements,” originally delivered as a speech in 1892, was one of the most influential documents of the Progressive movement.² Her efforts as a part of the Social Gospel – the religious wing of the Progressive movement – can be seen as an attempt to synthesize Christianity with modernity. But the conclusions of the Social Gospel movement were not wholly embraced by religious people. The Catholic Church, in contrast, was not as acquiescent to modernity as American Protestants. To begin with, the Pragmatism of the Social Gospel movement undercut the traditional Christian understanding of metaphysics, natural-law and the capacity of reason to attain objective truth. For those unsatisfied with the Social Gospel, the Catholic Church offered an alternative.³

This brief essay will begin with Addams’ “The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements.” It will pull out the Progressive ideas within, touch on its philosophical origins, and examine its religious values. More specifically, it will square Addams’ Progressive vision against the Catholic response of the time, focusing on Addams’ conception of social action and charity. The conclusion will take a more general tone, analyzing and evaluating the Social Gospel in light of the contributions made by Catholic intellectuals during the Progressive Era, as well as other thinkers. For a short paper, this may be too ambitious an effort, but if by the end the reader has a sense of two antagonistic views of charity and their possible implications, then it will have accomplished its task.

Much of Addams’ thought followed lock and step from her religious premise that Christianity had gone astray with Saint Paul’s emphasis on philosophy, metaphysics, salvation, communion with God, and other spiritual concerns.⁴ This view, not at all unique to Addams, followed logically from the Social Gospel synthesis of Christianity with Pragmatism and modern

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³ Woods, pp. 5-6
⁴ In a telling passage, she noted, “I believe that there is a distinct turning among many young men and women toward this simple acceptance of Christ’s message [the message being that Christ is found through fellowship]. They resent the assumption that Christianity is a set of ideas which belong to the religious consciousness, whatever that may be.” Addams, p. 85.
sociology. The orthodox Christian conception of a fixed and sinful human nature owing to man’s rebellion was out of step with the times. Indeed, to a Progressive, age was often enough to condemn an idea.

Instead, much as Darwin held that biological evolution was carrying man towards physical betterment, Social Gospel theologians held that man’s nature was fundamentally malleable and subject to beneficial evolutionary changes; it was up to a science of man to carry the burden of social progress. Matters of religious ritual and tradition only served to divert energies better spent in the trenches. As George Marsden described the situation, “To my mind, the test of a genuine example of the Social Gospel is whether other aspects of Christianity are subordinated to, and in effect incidental to, its social aspects.”

Addams expressed this in her article, as she wrote, “That Christianity has to be revealed and embodied in the line of social progress is a corollary to the simple proposition, that man’s action is found in his social relationships in the way in which he connects with his fellows; that his motives for action are the zeal and affection with which he regards his fellows.” In this way, Addams’ notion of religion took on a horizontal focus, with Christianity’s principal value flowing from its social and pragmatic potential. Christianity’s validity was thereby to be established by its “simple and natural expression in the social organism,” of which the humanitarian settlement house movement was part.

Also connected to this development was the abiding admiration for Comtian social science under the Progressive banner. The Social Gospel, in this spirit, pushed for a more practical religion, one that eschewed Christian contemplation and insights into the permanency of human nature and the natural-law. It is no coincidence that Addams and other Social Gospel advocates put a tremendous amount of faith in the powers of a “scientific” government fat on facts, figures, and statistics, the culmination of which would be the emergence of a truly just, democratic, and equal society. This, in effect, was their conception of the Kingdom of God.

Thus did Christianity lose its traditional claim of giving a true picture of the relationship between the physical and the metaphysical realms, between man and God and the nature of both.

The Catholic response to this message was nuanced, insightful, and remains relevant to the present day conversation on the proper Christian attitude towards social problems. Where more conservative Protestants lumped together the Social Gospel’s call for action with its new brand of social Christianity and therefore rejected both, Catholic thinkers drew a distinction. They emphasized the point that the fundamental purpose of the Church was not earthly but heavenly, and that any social action must be understood with that purpose in mind, as William Kerby explained, “The social work of the Catholic Church is so intimately bound up with its whole view of life and its normal service of souls that one cannot understand its spirit, agencies or motives unless they are studied in their organic relation to the process of spiritual life fostered in the traditions of the Church.” Charity was a valuable enterprise, of course, but to conceive of without reference to the supernatural was to completely miss the point, as the Catholic magazine America put it, “The great social work of the Church always has been and still is the

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6 Addams, p. 85.
7 Addams, p. 85.
8 Woods, p. 64.
Christianizing of mankind.” John J. Burke, editor of *Catholic World*, railed against any notion of social action that either divorced its undertaking from religious principles or placed too great a faith in the abilities of social scientists to advance the human condition. Still other Catholic thinkers expressed regret that care for the poor was being turned into a phase of social progress and nothing more.

To lay out the principles of any charitable work without an overwhelming reference to the Christian faith and an under-girding religious inspiration was anathema to Catholic intellectuals of the age. Jane Addams’ concluding paragraphs on the first principles of Hull-House do just that. She noted that she could not be sure to what extent Christianity played a role in the opening of the settlement house, and instead placed “the solidarity of the human race” as the foundational philosophy of the settlement house movement at large. The sympathetic Christian could point out that since Addams viewed Christianity as finding its embodiment in social brotherhood, this formulation of the principles of Hull-House may not be as off as it first appears. But this only brings into question Addams’ view of Christianity which, from the Catholic point of view, made at the very least the mistake of putting first things second and second things first.

In Addams’ view, Christianity is like putty, its greatest attribute being its ability to change shape; it is useful only insofar as man finds use in it. In the Catholic view, Christianity is like stone; it is used for foundation and construction alike, and it cannot be displaced without wrecking all of those things founded on and made with it. For the Church, charity and social action were built with Christian stone. Whereas to Addams’ social work gave Christianity meaning, to the Church, Christianity gave social work meaning. To remove Christianity from charity meant to create something new entirely. What sort of charity, after all, would provide for a man’s physical needs but neglect his ultimate spiritual needs? From the Catholic perspective, the physical and the spiritual can hardly be separated.

The Social Gospel brings to mind the observations of Isabel Paterson. Paterson believed that the great religions have always at the same time been great intellectual systems. She wrote that they have always seen charity as something secondary to production for the reason that without production there could be nothing to give. Some amount of charity was, of course, a moral obligation, but the complete life of charity, the life of the almoner, was not made obligatory because it could not be a general way of life. She noted that charity when enjoined in the name of God never asks a man to “strip his soul in return for bread,” and always seeks a certain level of self-improvement. The humanitarian, on the other hand, “puts himself in the place of God” and “requires that others shall be in want” since helping others is his primary purpose. Paterson used the classic line “humanitarian with the guillotine” to describe her target. This phrase, meant to express how good will and intention can suffer from fatal distortion, captures at least in a modest sense how social action with the purpose of social betterment, a virtuous cause when understood within its Christian context, can be perverted into a welfare state

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11 Woods, p. 69.
12 Ibid., p. 70.
13 Addams, pp. 86-87.
15 Ibid., p. 253.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., p. 247.
technocracy of social engineering, the sort which Alexis de Tocqueville warned of in *Democracy in America*.

C. S. Lewis also gave warning against such an arrangement, which he called the “omnicompetent global technocracy.” He said, “Of all tyrannies, a tyranny exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive.” [footnote] He went so far as to compare the welfare state with Hitler’s totalitarianism. The humanitarian sees social problems as pathological, Lewis argued, and in doing so, sees questions of justice as secondary to results. Criminal activity or poverty or failing schools or drug use all become “social ills” and require a cure, developed, approved, and administered by the experts. Ethical questions are matters on which anyone may have an opinion but the question of a cure, which carries with it a probability of success and failure, can only be answered by someone of technical proficiency – an expert. Society thus becomes a laboratory for social scientists who view their mission as one of reconstructing the system according to a specialized blueprint. Put another way, people become playthings for government planners. This, Lewis concluded, is how both the welfare state (for all its good intentions) and Hitler operated from the same principle. The genocide of the Jewish people and other political enemies had nothing to do with justice or punishment; it was rather a remedial treatment, a cure for a sickness that had, on Hitler’s view, caused chaos in the German social body.

Alasdair MacIntyre wrote about the same problem in *After Virtue*: “Government itself [as it adopts for itself the role of manipulative social manager and expands the ranks of civil servants] becomes a hierarchy of bureaucratic managers, and the major justification advanced for the intervention of government in society is the contention that government has resources of competence which most citizens do not possess.” This understanding of politics is a fantasy. Policy recommendations based on “model building” that affect to maximize “social welfare” or reduce “total social costs” or minimize “monopoly power” etc. are loaded with normative value judgments and interpersonal utility comparisons. Politics is most emphatically not a field where ethics can be cast aside in favor of some “scientific” alternative; all political decisions ultimately rest on value judgments.

Lewis went on and specifically criticized those governments which used Christian language to justify their planning: “For every Government consists of mere men and is, strictly viewed, a makeshift; if it adds to its commands ‘Thus saith the Lord,’ it lies, and lies dangerously.” One can imagine what Lewis would have thought of Lyndon Johnson’s 1965 speech on the creation of Medicare, where the president linked the program to Deuteronomy 15:11, where God said, “Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, to thy needy, in thy land.”

To be sure, Catholic social teaching since *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 has embraced a modest degree of welfare state measures as means of preserving human dignity and pinpointing a “third way” between capitalism and socialism. Both Leo XIII and Pius XI believed that wage determination, for example, was a proper function of the state. But while this position may be a divergence from the Scholastic view of the “just price” as being synonymous with the voluntary market price, historian Thomas Woods notes that there was nothing within the Catholic Church

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20 Ibid.
that could be considered an arm of the Social Gospel, and even these more moderate economic views of Leo XIII and Pius XI, Woods concludes, run “directly counter to the entire Catholic intellectual tradition, according to which man is to conform his actions to reality, rather than embarking on the hopeless and foolish task of forcing the world to conform to him and to his desires.”

Adam Smith’s example in The Theory of Moral Sentiments of the conceited legislator – the “man of system” – who goes about forcing his plans on the world as if it were a chessboard is precisely the intellectual attitude to which Woods is referring.

Lewis concluded that the result of this “chessboard politics” (what could accurately be called Social Gospel politics) is the death of classical political theory, along with such conceptions as natural-law, the rights of man, and the rule of law. In this regard, it is relevant that Pope Leo XIII looked to revive the Scholasticism of Saint Thomas Aquinas as a way of putting forth a rival Catholic program and denouncing modern errors. The natural-law bore heavily on the minds of Progressive Era Catholic sociologists. They saw their discipline as not only dealing with questions of “is” in observed social phenomena, but also with questions of “ought.” Cultural developments which ran counter to the proper guidelines of Christian behavior were not permitted to be looked on with indifference. Instead, Catholic sociologists took the position that the more a civilization drifts from Christian foundations the greater its risk of falling apart.

When considered with a mind towards political-economy, Catholic charity and Social Gospel humanitarianism attach themselves quite plainly to opposite schools of thought, with Catholic charity sitting alongside Aquinas and the natural-law tradition, up through the British tradition, to Lord Acton and F. A. Hayek; and Social Gospel humanitarianism sitting alongside the French Enlightenment tradition, of kind with Rousseau, Saint-Simon, Comte, the German Historical School, and 20th century economic planners. Indeed, the Progressive movement, of which the Social Gospel was part, was the way by which 19th century socialist thought came to the United States. This political connection comes as no surprise, of course, because the Social Gospel required that a scientific government put its plans into force. Catholic charity on the other hand requires no such state apparatus, only a healthy theological understanding of Christ’s commandment to “love one another, as I have loved you, that you also love one another.”

The chief difference between these rival positions does not, in fact, rest on the question of charity, as such, but on the distinction between charity and policy. In this sense, then, it may not be a stretch to say that the Social Gospel had no conception of charity whatsoever. From a Catholic point of view, that is probably the inescapable conclusion.

Charity has long been described an expression of God’s love, as opposed to a policy measure aimed at lowering the unemployment rate or the labor hours necessary to buy a loaf of bread. As an expression of God’s love, charity knows no boundaries; it goes to friends and enemies alike – quite a difference from redistribution measures, long known to be but another route of funneling cash and favors in order to secure political reelection. Further, charity is a religious virtue; it is an ethical statement. It claims to be capital “G” Good and a worthy choice for human action for no other reason than that it is a reflection of God’s fixed and eternal nature. This claim the Social Gospel rejected outright. The only place thus left to go for a justification of

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22 Woods, p. 3.
23 Ibid., p. 61.
24 John 13:34-35.
its welfare state measures was the refuge of pragmatic successes, but this is precisely what Lewis was afraid of.

Lewis argued that in the absence of virtue or the “Tao” efforts to justify any sentiment must be made without reference to “justice” or “ordinancy.”25 Thus do we find not only the reason for the tremendous importance of pragmatism within the Social Gospel, but also the reason for its abandonment of so much of what gives Catholic charity its meaning, taken as it is from a traditional understanding of God’s eternal nature and the natural-law. If it is doubted that the Social Gospel stood outside the “Tao,” as Lewis called it, consider the remarks of Thomas Woods: “Social Gospel Christians could be considered allies by secular Progressives and could play an important role in the Progressive movement precisely because they portrayed Christ’s message in a naturalistic way that posed little threat to the new secular ethic….” [footnote] Recall that in the Progressive world view, ethical questions were to be removed from the field of speculative moral philosophy and re-established within a paradigm of value-free empirical science.

In After Virtue (an appropriately titled book for the topic at hand) Alasdair MacIntyre noted that modern social science, with its disposition towards social planning, was making a grab for the power of God.26 Lewis called this development “the abolition of man.” If MacIntyre is correct, then it will be the case that what Social Gospel humanitarianism represents is the distortion of rightly understood Catholic charity with its religious traditions and spiritual virtues. It was with this understanding that both C. S. Lewis and Isabel Paterson not only drew a sharp distinction between charity of the Catholic variety and humanitarianism of the Social Gospel sort, but also feared humanitarianism’s welfare state implications. In this way, Social Gospel humanitarianism promises to bring about two of Lewis’s fears: the abandonment of the natural-law and the centralization of power into the hands of de-humanizing conditioners.

In conclusion, it is appropriate to make mention of the conflict between scientism and sapientia, terms not yet used but whose meanings have been ever present. Scientism versus sapientia refers to the battle for supremacy between metaphysical knowledge and physical reality. The topic of this paper can be fitted cleanly into this broader contest, with Catholic charity sitting on the side of sapientia and Social Gospel humanitarianism sitting on the side of scientism. Catholic charity is supernatural. It carries a direct and inseparable connection to God, and only then do its physical results have any meaning. The Catechism reads: “The first step in helping the disadvantaged is to acknowledge the sacred dignity and image of God found in each person. What is also required is a conscience formation from which flow the beliefs, attitudes, and actions that will help the poor. Having more is never enough. Being more is paramount.”27 Social Gospel humanitarianism starts with man and ends with man; it is fundamentally concerned with the material world. What this really amounts to, in the end, is the specialization of charity. It bends one of the religious virtues into a quantitative expertise whose principal purpose is a planned advancement of the human economic condition, and it is doubtful that any Social Gospel advocate would have denied this.

26 MacIntyre, p. 97.
Bibliography


