
Jane Addams's Social Gospel Synthesis and the Catholic Response

Competing Views of Charity and Their Implications

— ◆ —

BRANDON HARNISH

The turn of the twentieth century was a time of philosophical dislocation. The scientific and philosophical writings of 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 it served as the final proof of 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 people's material condition and thrusting mankind into the "positive stage of history." It followed, then, that education ought not to inculcate truth and doctrine (because science might at any time 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

Brandon Harnish lives in Bluffton, Indiana.

The Independent Review, v. 16, n. 1, Summer 2011, ISSN 1086-1653, Copyright © 2011, pp. 93-100.

society's solving of any and all problems by means of scientific government planning (Woods 2004; Pestritto and Atto 2008).

These changes did not go unnoticed by religious people, and serious efforts were made to confront them. Jane Addams's *Twenty Years at Hull-House* ([1910] 1998) 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 Progressive movement's most influential documents. Her efforts as part of the Social Gospel movement—the religious wing of the Progressive movement—may be seen as an attempt to synthesize Christianity and modernity. Religious people did not wholly embrace the Social Gospel movement's conclusions, however. The Catholic Church in particular was not as acquiescent to modernity as American Protestants. To begin with, the Social Gospel movement's pragmatism 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 (Woods 2004).

In this brief article, I begin with Addams's "The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements." I pull out its Progressive ideas, touch on its philosophical origins, and examine its religious values. More specifically, I contrast Addams's Progressive vision, focusing on her conception of social action and charity, with the contemporary Catholic response. I conclude in a more general way, analyzing and evaluating the Social Gospel in light of the contributions made by Catholic intellectuals and other thinkers during the Progressive Era.

Much of Addams's 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.¹ This view, not at all unique to Addams, followed logically from the Social Gospel synthesis of Christianity with pragmatism and modern 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 alone was often enough to discredit an idea.

Instead, much as Darwin held that biological evolution was carrying man toward 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 describes 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" (1980, 255). Addams expressed this view in her article

1. In a telling passage, Addams notes, "I believe that there is a distinct turning among many young men and women toward this simple acceptance of Christ's message [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" ([1910] 1998, 85).

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” ([1910] 1998, 85). In this way, Addams’s 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 ([1910] 1998, 85).

Also connected to this development was the abiding admiration for Comtian social science under the Progressive banner.² The Social Gospel, in this spirit, pushed for a more practical religion, one that eschewed Christian contemplation and insights into the permanence 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 vision, in effect, was their conception of the Kingdom of God (Woods 2004). Thus did Christianity lose its traditional claim of giving a true picture of the relationship between the physical and the metaphysical realms, of the relationship between man and God, and of the nature of both.

The Catholic response to this message was nuanced and insightful, and it remains relevant to the present-day conversation on the proper Christian attitude toward social problems. Whereas 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 that the church’s fundamental purpose was not earthly, but heavenly, and that any social action must be understood with that purpose in mind. As William Kerby explained in 1907, “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” (qtd. in Woods 2004, 71). Charity was a valuable enterprise, of course, but to conceive of it without reference to the supernatural was to miss the point completely. As the Catholic magazine *America* observed in 1913, “The great social work of the Church always has been and still is the Christianizing of mankind” (qtd. in Woods 2004, 68). 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 social scientists’ abilities 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 (Woods 2004).

2. For more on the Progressive Era in general, see Pestritto and Atto 2008.

To lay out the principles of any charitable work without an overwhelming reference to the Christian faith and an undergirding religious inspiration was anathema to Catholic intellectuals of the age, but Jane Addams's concluding paragraphs on the first principles of Hull House do exactly 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 she placed "the solidarity of the human race" as the foundational philosophy of the settlement-house movement at large ([1910] 1998, 86–87). The sympathetic Christian might point out that because Addams viewed Christianity as finding its embodiment in social brotherhood, this formulation of the principles of Hull House may not be as far off as it first appears, but this interpretation only brings into question Addams's 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's 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 of it. For the Catholic 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 was to create something entirely new. After all, what sort of charity 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, who 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 because without production there could be nothing to give. Some 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" (1943, 252) and always seeks a certain level of self-improvement. The humanitarian, in contrast, "puts himself in the place of God" and "requires that others shall be in want" (253) because helping others is his primary purpose. Paterson used the classic expression "humanitarian with the guillotine" (247) to describe her target. This phrase, meant to express how goodwill and intention may 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, may be perverted into a welfare-state technocracy of social engineering, the kind that Alexis de Tocqueville warned against in *Democracy in America*.

C. S. Lewis also warned against such an arrangement, which he called the "omnicompetent global technocracy." He wrote, "Of all tyrannies, a tyranny exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive" (1958), and 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 he sees questions of justice as secondary to results. Criminal activity, poverty, failing schools, and drug use all become “social ills” and require a cure to be 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 be answered only 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. In this regard, Lewis concluded, 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, in Hitler’s view, caused chaos in the German social body.

Alasdair MacIntyre writes 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” (2007, 85). This understanding of politics is a fantasy. Policy recommendations based on “model building” that affect to maximize “social welfare,” reduce “total social costs,” or minimize “monopoly power” are loaded with normative judgments and interpersonal utility comparisons. Politics is most emphatically not a field in which ethics can be cast aside in favor of a “scientific” alternative; all political decisions ultimately rest on value judgments.

Lewis specifically criticized governments that use 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” (1958). One can imagine what Lewis would have thought of Lyndon Johnson’s 1965 speech on the creation of Medicare, in which 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 charting a “third way” between capitalism and socialism. Both Leo XIII (pope 1878–1903) and Pius XI (pope 1922–1939) believed that wage determination, for example, was a proper function of the state. Although this position may diverge from the Scholastic view of the “just price” as being synonymous with the voluntary market price, historian Thomas Woods notes that nothing within the Catholic Church could be considered an arm of the Social Gospel. Even Leo XIII and Pius XI’s more moderate economic views, 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” (2002). In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* ([1759] 2007), Adam Smith’s example of the presumptuous legislator—the “man of system” who goes about forcing his plans on the world as if it were a chessboard—precisely describes the intellectual attitude to which Woods is referring.

Lewis concluded that the result of this “chessboard politics” (which might accurately be called Social Gospel politics) is the death of classical political theory and of such conceptions as natural law, the rights of man, and the rule of law. In this regard, it is relevant that Pope Leo XIII sought to revive the scholasticism of Saint Thomas Aquinas (2002) as a way of putting forth a rival Catholic program and denouncing modern errors. The natural law weighed heavily on Progressive Era Catholic sociologists’ minds. They saw their discipline as dealing not only with questions of “is” in observed social phenomena, but also with questions of “ought.” Cultural developments that ran counter to the proper guidelines of Christian behavior were not permitted to be viewed with indifference. Instead, Catholic sociologists took the position that the more a civilization drifts from Christian foundations, the greater its risk of falling apart (Woods 2002).

When considered with a mind toward political economy, Catholic charity and Social Gospel humanitarianism attach themselves quite plainly to opposite schools of thought, with Catholic charity sitting alongside Thomas 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, having affinity with Rousseau, Saint-Simon, Comte, the German historical school, and twentieth-century economic planners. Indeed, the Progressive movement, which included the Social Gospel, was the principal avenue along which nineteenth-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, in contrast, requires no such state apparatus, only a healthy theological understanding of Christ’s commandment to “love one another, as I have loved you” (John 13:34–35). 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 conclusion is probably inescapable.

Charity has long been described as 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 means of funneling cash and favors in order to secure political reelection. Further, charity is a religious virtue and an ethical statement. It claims to be capital “G” Good and a worthy choice for human action simply because it is a reflection of God’s fixed and eternal nature. This claim the Social

Gospel rejected outright. The only place left to find a justification of its welfare-state measures was, as Lewis feared, the refuge of pragmatic successes.

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” (1944, 21). Thus, we find not only the reason for pragmatism’s tremendous importance in the Social Gospel, but also the reason for that movement’s 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 what Woods has to say on the subject: “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” (2004, 4). Recall that in the Progressive worldview, ethical questions were to be removed from the field of speculative moral philosophy and reestablished in a paradigm of value-free empirical science. In *After Virtue* (an appropriately titled book for the topic at hand), MacIntyre notes that modern social science, with its disposition toward social planning, was making a grab for the power of God. Lewis called this development “the abolition of man” (1944). If MacIntyre is correct, Social Gospel humanitarianism represents the distortion of rightly understood Catholic charity with its religious traditions and spiritual virtues. With this understanding, both Lewis and Paterson not only drew a sharp distinction between charity of the Catholic variety and humanitarianism of the Social Gospel sort, but they also feared humanitarianism’s welfare-state implications. In this way, Social Gospel humanitarianism promised to bring about two of Lewis’s fears: the abandonment of the natural law and the centralization of power into the hands of dehumanizing conditioners. In conclusion, it is appropriate to note the conflict between *scientism* and *sapientia*, previously unmentioned terms whose meanings nevertheless have been ever present in this article. “Scientism versus *sapientia*” refers to the battle for supremacy between metaphysical knowledge and physical reality.³ My topic here can be fitted cleanly into this broader contest, with Social Gospel humanitarianism on the side of scientism and Catholic charity on the side of *sapientia*. The basis of Catholic charity is supernatural. Such charity carries a direct and inseparable connection to God, and only in this regard do its physical results have meaning. The *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* 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” (2006, 454). Social Gospel humanitarianism starts with man and ends with man; it is fundamentally concerned with the material world. What this approach amounts to, in the end, is the specialization of charity. It bends one of the religious virtues into a quantitative

3. See Aeschliman 1983 on Lewis’s “case against scientism.”

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 its embrace of such means and ends.

References

- Addams, Jane. [1910] 1998. *Twenty Years at Hull-House*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Aeschliman, Michael D. 1983. *The Restitution of Man: C. S. Lewis and the Case Against Scientism*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans.
- Lewis, C. S. 1944. *The Abolition of Man*. New York: HarperCollins.
- . 1958. The Willing Slaves of the Welfare State. Available at: <http://docs.google.com/>.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. 2007. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. 3rd ed. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Marsden, George M. 1980. *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870–1925*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Paterson, Isabel. 1943. *The God of the Machine*. New York: Putnam.
- Pestritto, Ronald J., and William J Atto, eds. 2008. *American Progressivism*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books.
- Thomas Aquinas. 2002. *On Law, Morality, and Politics*. Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett.
- United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*. 2006. Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.
- Woods, Thomas E., Jr. 2002. Catholic Social Teaching and Economic Law: An Unresolved Tension. Available at: <http://www.lewrockwell.com/woods/woods8.html>.
- . 2004. *The Church Confronts Modernity*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 2005. *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery.

SUBSCRIBE NOW AND RECEIVE A FREE BOOK!



“*The Independent Review* does not accept pronouncements of government officials nor the conventional wisdom at face value.”

—**JOHN R. MACARTHUR**, Publisher, *Harper’s*

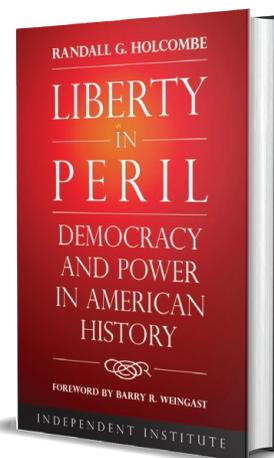
“*The Independent Review* is excellent.”

—**GARY BECKER**, Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences

Subscribe to [The Independent Review](#) and receive a free book of your choice such as *Liberty in Peril: Democracy and Power in American History*, by Randall G. Holcombe.

Thought-provoking and educational, [The Independent Review](#) is blazing the way toward informed debate. This quarterly journal offers leading-edge insights on today’s most critical issues in economics, healthcare, education, the environment, energy, defense, law, history, political science, philosophy, and sociology.

Student? Educator? Journalist? Business or civic leader? Engaged citizen? This journal is for YOU!



Order today for more **FREE** book options

SUBSCRIBE

The Independent Review is now available digitally on mobile devices and tablets via the Apple/Android App Stores and Magzter. Subscriptions and single issues start at \$2.99. [Learn More.](#)

