

Abstract

Social gospel theology asked people to live their lives like Jesus, serving the poor and oppressed. Some major theological developers of social gospel were white church leaders such as Walter Rauschenbusch, John Commons, and Henry King, Pope Leo XIII – as well as black church leaders such as Reverdy Ransom. In 1908, the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ was established to unify American Protestants behind the Social Gospel (Social Christianity) Movement. This research project focuses on the American Social Gospel Movement during the Progressive Era – roughly the 1880s to the early 1920s. The study examined the movement, specifically how it was applied to non-white people during the Progressive Era. First, the study looked at key church leaders and their foundational works on social gospel theology. Next, the study examined how the social gospel was applied to Native Americans, African Americans, and Asian immigrants. Last, the study evaluated the Social Gospel Movement to determine its successes and failures. Because of race and gender norms in Progressive Era America, it is likely that the social gospel fell short of reaching people in certain ethnic and gender groups and was applied in unequal ways. Therefore, these groups experienced diminished opportunity for social reforms and uplift that the Social Gospel Movement preached for.

Introduction and Research Question

Introduction:

The Social Gospel Movement during the Progressive Era in America developed in response to the sub-human conditions brought about by industrialization of the country. Basically, social gospel theologians believed in a religion of social service. The social gospel doctrine developed by leading theologians in America asked people to live their lives like Jesus, serving the poor and oppressed. Their reasoning was that Jesus Christ did, and he took his part in the affairs of our common life. It was for that purpose that he died on the cross for mankind. He wanted to save the world.

Many works have concluded that the social gospel was a Protestant reaction to progressive reforms, while others have decided that social gospel was a natural evolution of Christianity to meet the needs of the times. What is clear is that both the social gospel and progressive reforms worked in unison with the same mission to elevate living conditions and equality for the masses in American society. It is also easy to see the successes of social gospel because an overwhelming number of progressive reformers were members of American Christian churches. The Social Gospel Movement was able to work in unison with Progressive reforms at the time BECAUSE of the ideology behind the doctrine. However, there were shortfalls to the movement as many groups of people other than White faced challenges in addition to the effects of industrialization.

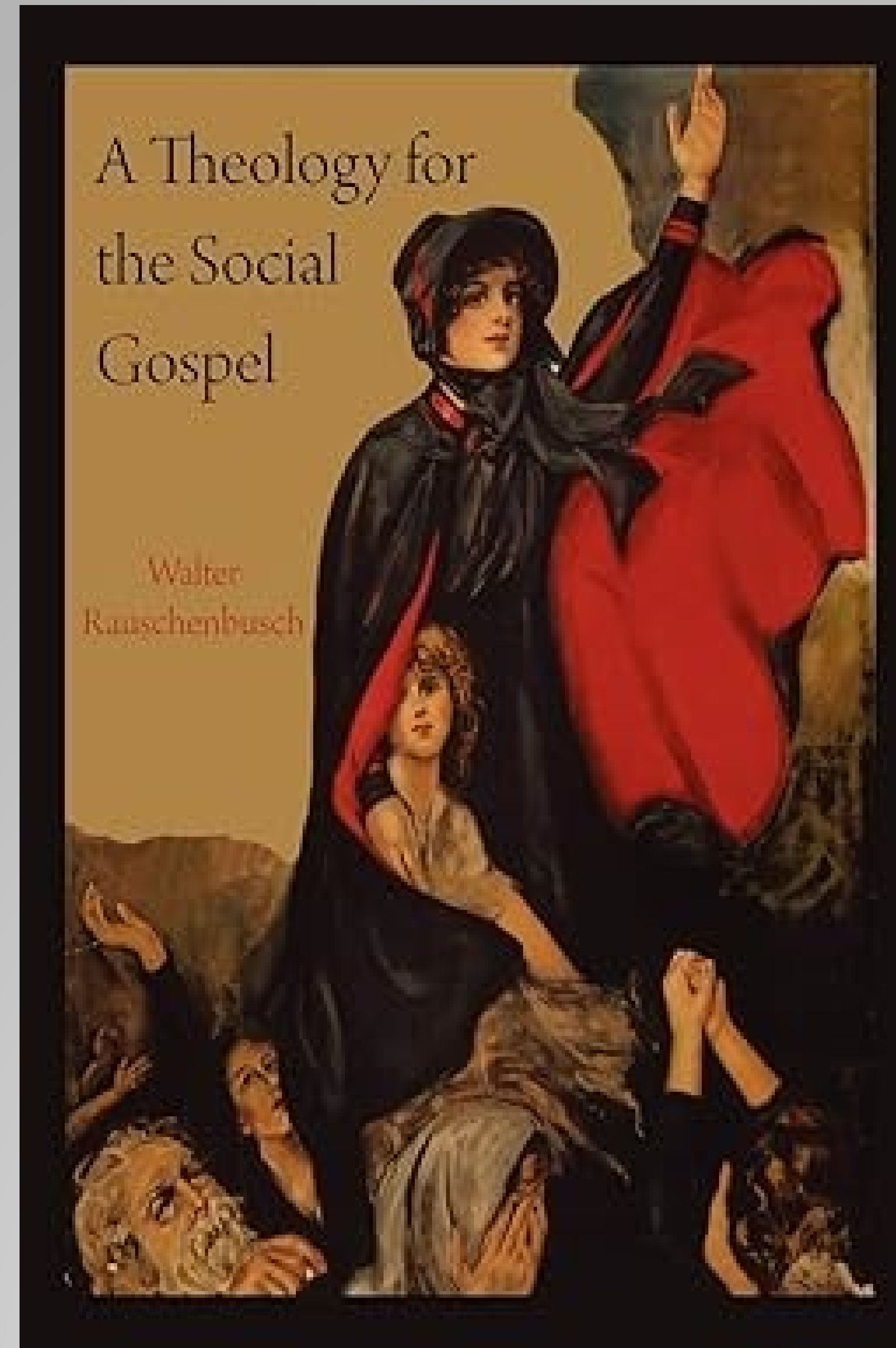
African Americans were in the throes of the Jim Crowe South, and continued as victims of widespread discrimination and violence, such as lynchings. Native Americans were almost all living on reservations, and Asian immigrants were still not allowed to be U.S. citizens, even though generations had lived here since the early 1850s. In addition, America was a White patriarchal nation in Progressive Era America, creating systemic circumstances that undermined the biblical foundations of the movement – namely, the concept of God’s love for ALL mankind. This created an uphill battle for implementing social gospel doctrine and programs and hindered equal application of the movement.

Research Question:

In what ways did the Social Gospel Movement fail to uplift ALL Americans?

Methods

This research project examined the American Social Gospel movement, specifically how it was applied to non-white people during the Progressive Era. It first identified key movement leaders and the development of social gospel theology and doctrine. Leaders of the movement leaned on and quoted biblical scripture that centered on duty to fellow man, and love of ALL mankind. "ALL" being the key term mentioned in most of their doctrine teachings. Next, it looked at a small sampling of newspaper articles from the era to see how the social gospel worked in "real time." Then, expert findings on the division between White and Black Social Gospel Movements were examined and explanations of how the social gospel was applied to African Americans, Native Americans, and Asian immigrants were given. A case study on a diverse, early Los Angeles is also examined to see how the social gospel was applied to the ethnic communities there. Last, the study evaluated the Social Gospel Movement to determine its successes and failures, and detailed uncertainties through identifying areas for further study.



Rauschenbusch's text. The Social Gospel movement applied Christian ethics to social problems, especially social justice, inequality, liquor, crime, racial tensions, slums, bad hygiene, child labor, weak labor unions, poor schools, and the danger of war
Image Source: 2010 Reprint of 1918 Edition.
<https://www.amazon.com/Theology-Social-Gospel-Walter-Rauschenbusch/dp/1891396528>.

“For God shows no partiality”

~ Romans, 2:11~
(AMP)



Christianity was present on reservations; however, the mission was worship and conversion. Native Americans were not afforded social uplift that the Social Gospel provided for white Americans. Image Source: Pala Indian Reservation, California, June 4, 1939. Photo courtesy Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/201770122/>.



The Social Gospel movement in real-time. Image Source: Fischer, Tony. *Jesus Feeds the Hungry*, from *Art in the Christian Tradition*, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=57785>



Rev. Walter Rauschenbusch was a key founder in the Social Gospel movement. Image Source: American Baptist Historical Society. <https://abhsarchives.org/walter-rauschenbusch-social-gospel-introduction/>.

“In what ways did the American Social Gospel Movement fall short of uplifting ALL Americans?”



Chinese and other Asian immigrants were ignored by the Social Gospel movement, as Exclusion laws did not recognize their citizen status until 1943. Image Source: *The Christian Stairway*, ca. 1885. Thomas Houseworth, photographer. Photograph. Collection of Oakland Museum of California. <https://collections.museumca.org/?q=collection-item/h94581>.

Limitations and Conclusions

Limitations

One limitation of this research study is that only three out of countless numbers of newspaper articles were examined to demonstrate social gospel movement in real-time. Another limitation was the time constraints of the study that hampered the gathering and examining of other primary sources; this would have created a more in-depth study with perhaps different conclusions. For example, women’s church and social groups were common in the Progressive Era, but time constraints did not allow for research into what groups existed, if they were open to everyone, or if they provided opportunity and equal application of the social gospel.

Conclusions

In addition to newspaper articles, the work of Charles Stelzle, a Presbyterian minister, shed light on how the movement planned to uplift specific groups of Americans. In his book “American Social and Religious Conditions,” chapters specifically address how the Social Gospel could be applied to “The Immigrant,” “The Negro,” “The Indian,” and “The Spanish-American.” Stelzle book left out Chinese and Asian Americans.

However, what is evident is that there were clearly two different types of social gospel in practice during the Progressive Era - the White and the Black social gospel. One source found the Social Gospel Movement was not an intentional racist movement, but it did reinforce White hegemony that added to the racial divide. Another source found the Black Social Gospel Movement surpassed its White counterpart to meet the needs unique to Black Americans, especially in the South. The movement took up advocacy on social issues for African Americans that White social gospel fell short of, such as lynchings and racial equality.

Future Work

- Further research to determine how the American Social Gospel movement impacted or affected people from different walks of life in real-time is needed.
- Another area for study is one that examines in what ways were women both active and passive in the Social Gospel movement, and if the movement uplifted them – or left them as it did for other groups of Americans.
- Future work could include categorizing HOW the social gospel fell short of its mission. For example, a focus on if the movement neglected Chinese and Asian Americans because existing Exclusion laws virtually designated this community as non-American. Research that seeks to find correlations between neglected groups and existing social norms (such as customs and laws) could expand on conclusions in this study.

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