

Richard Allen, The Social Gospel: Religion and Social Reform in Canada 1914-1928

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Reviews

The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada 1914-28.
Richard Allen. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1971.

Richard Allen's *The Social Passion*¹ shatters a tradition of neglecting religion in the interpretation of modern Canadian history and brings an important new perspective to a host of controversial problems. To cite but a few examples: Allen's analysis of the Winnipeg Strike seriously undermines the view that the strike represented a simple confrontation of classes, while his treatment of the integration of the social gospel with agrarian movements of the period tends to refute the idea that such rural protests were grounded upon nostalgic reaction. In the social gospel he finds plausible explanations for both the popular support for Mackenzie King as a social reformer and the fusion of three historically jealous denominations in Church Union. Although not without some defects, *The Social Passion* stands as an indispensable reference for serious students of Canadian history.

Allen's approach to the emergence of the social gospel in the Canadian Protestant churches is essentially revisionist. The social gospel was not, as some have assumed, an American import. Nor was it simply a reaction to industrialization in Canada. In broad terms it was a product of "currents of thought and action which were sweeping the western world" (p. 9) — currents to which European, British, American and Canadian thinkers had all contributed. Allen also argues strenuously that the rise of the social gospel was in no way inhibited by the War. The resignation of radical clergymen such as William Irvine, J. S. Woodsworth, William Ivens and Salem Bland was a result of their unwillingness to tolerate institutions committed to the war effort rather than any conservative reaction in the churches. The social gospel, in fact, increased its influence under the stress of war and reached its crest in the plans for postwar reconstruction.

The book includes an impressive analysis of the crisis in and decline of the social gospel in the 1920's. Committed by the war's end to a substantial improvement of labour's lot, most churchmen remained true to their ideals through the 'unrest' of 1919. But the postwar recession, coinciding with major fund-raising campaigns and some tokens of reform by the "new businessmen," proved a formidable adversary to any progressive application of the new theology. By the summer of 1921, the Methodists, traditionally the most advanced adherents of the social gospel, were giving a cool reception to Salem Bland's

1 All references unless otherwise cited are to this book.

advocacy of a society based on labour values. They were no longer prepared to tolerate separate labour churches and, in the course of a printer's strike in their publishing house in Toronto, found themselves in the compromising role of opposing the 'closed shop' and employing 'scab' labour. By mid-decade, crisis touched every facet of the movement. Prohibition, triumphant during the war, suffered successive defeats in all but two provinces between 1919 and 1926. The latter year also saw the final disintegration of the Progressives as an effective political movement. Even success was costly. While professional social workers were few in number and widely scattered, the Social Service Councils provided a valuable rallying point which kept the churches at the centre of practical action. By 1928 the professionals were strong enough to mount their own secular organizations leaving the churches in a backwater. As social gospellers met defeat in the domestic arena, they turned their attention to the international scene and the revival of pacificism. For many, this was apparently less a positive new assertion of social gospel principles than an escape from the issues raised by previous losses. Some, who seriously re-appraised their experiences, did not suffer a lessening of social passion, but rather gained from them a more realistic understanding of society. They, Allen suggests, would lead the way to the 'Radical Christianity' of the succeeding decade.

Despite the patent merits of Allen's book, it should be read with caution in some areas. In borrowing the terms 'radical', 'conservative' and 'progressive' from American students of the social gospel, Allen neglects to include their warning that these descriptions were applicable in a social and political sense only.² Many conservatives and progressives were as committed to their versions of a regeneration of an evil social order as were the radicals to theirs. The distinction lies in the identification of the primary source of the evil. To some, the roots of all social ills were to be found in capitalism and the "Kingdom" could never be realized until capitalism was replaced by a new socio-economic system. To others, a pragmatic reform of all abuses in the existing system appeared a more certain road to the Kingdom than some vague socialist experiment. To still others, the relation of major abuses to capitalism was by no means so apparent as were the yawning pitfalls which a corrupt society presented for the weak and the unwary. The terms 'radical', 'progressive' and 'conservative' are fairly descriptive of both the varied political and social attitudes of the adherents of the social gospel and the direction of their impact on the political life of the day. But they are relative terms within the social gospel; such 'conservatives', for example, should not be confused with churchmen who were opposed to or incomplete in their acceptance of the social gospel theology.

Within these categories, Allen fails to present a balanced survey of the social gospel. The activities and ideas of the leading radicals are sketched

2 P. A. Carter, *The Decline and Revival of the Social Gospel* (rev. ed., Hamden, 1956), p. 12.

in considerable detail. A discussion of Salem Bland's theories, for example, occupies an entire chapter. The progressives are treated in more general terms with useful profiles of leading individuals interspersed throughout. The conservatives are discussed in generalities only. Since no individuals are presented as recognizable examples whose theories can be analyzed in manageable form, they appear as a blurred mass on the right, seldom distinguishable from elements in the churches who never accepted the new theology. For an historian who is an avid sympathizer of the social gospel, the conservatives, nevertheless, seem to have had their uses. Allen relegates to them the concerns of the social gospel which he finds least attractive and then virtually defines them out of the movement.

In indicating that the conservatives were closest to the evangelicals in their pre-occupation with issues such as prohibition, prostitution and gambling, Allen is undoubtedly correct. But to suggest that their approaches were also similar — “emphasizing personal-ethical issues, tending to identify sin with individual acts, and taking as their social strategy legislative reform of the environment” (p. 17) — is to eliminate any criteria which might include them in a definition of the social gospel. For the social gospel interpreted such issues in the light of social rather than personal ethics, identifying sin with society rather than the individual and seeking legislative reform as part of a general reconstruction of society based on Christian principles. That there were many in such movements who were not adherents of the social gospel is true. But the social gospel's involvement in traditional evangelical causes tended to transform the latter in both rhetoric and motivation. Campaigns against prostitution and the liquor traffic mushroomed and secured their greatest victories under the influence of the social gospel. To many social gospellers such reforms were as important a part of any complete social reconstruction as factory acts or minimum wage laws. Indeed to some, prohibition appeared as fundamental a reform as the replacement of capitalism to the radicals. In this guise it was regularly presented to the people; an amelioration of, perhaps even a solution to, such important social problems as broken homes, crime, highway and industrial accidents, disease, the white slave traffic and poverty.³

The difficulties inherent in an interpretation of the social gospel which excludes ‘moral’ or ‘prohibitive’ reforms from a central place in the movement are apparent in the chapter on prohibition. The obvious purpose of the chapter is to demonstrate the severity of the blow dealt the morale of “conservatives . . . progressives and many radicals” (p. 263) by the defeat of prohibition. Yet, Allen seems most reluctant to concede that much genuine social gospel idealism was actually involved in the movement. Both radicals and progressives, he argues, put greater emphasis on other issues. Only the conservatives gave

3 For a typical example of a social gospel rationalization of prohibition see W. H. Magney, “The Methodist Church and the National Gospel,” *The Bulletin*, United Church Archives, Toronto, No. 20, 1968, p. 58.

priority to prohibitive reforms and their motivation in these, he implies, was the old-fashioned desire to remove "standing temptations to sin" (p. 265). The fact that social gospellers of all persuasions did support prohibition stemmed, he vaguely suggests, from their belief in the imminence of its success. Having committed themselves by their initial support, they were drawn further and further into the movement. Consequently, the United Church after its formation in 1925 was "forced" into strenuous exertions "in defence of the conservative wing of the social gospel" (p. 282).

Such a laboured attempt to separate social gospel and prohibition movements in spirit and intent does little service to our understanding of either. That personal sin no longer provided the perspective from which churches approached the problem was suggested by the Methodists in their removal from their constitution in 1911 of the designation "sin" for a variety of activities including drinking.⁴ Nor should it come as any surprise that the United Church enthusiastically supported a measure which had long held a respected place in the social blueprints of its constituent churches. Indeed, only when prohibition was in effect did other issues assume greater prominence in social gospel programmes and activities. Allen consistently neglects the rationale of a majority of progressive and conservative churchmen in directing a large share of their energies to issues not related to the reform of capitalism.

A further problem with *The Social Passion* is the extent to which its depth of research and quality of analysis vary from region to region. The author appears most knowledgeable in his treatment of parts of the Prairies and Ontario but quite superficial in his handling of the Maritimes. In interpreting the latter, he seems to be governed by its traditional stereotype as ultra-conservative — an impression apparently reinforced by a perusal of the unprogressive *Presbyterian Witness*. In any case, he arrived at the startling conclusion that in 1919 the Maritimes was "a part of the nation where the social gospel had made virtually no impact whatsoever" (p. 110). How one region of the country could escape a movement whose rise he attributes to broad intellectual currents, he does not see fit to explain.

Allen's picture of the Maritimes should have been modified by even the limited evidence he had at hand. For example, he neglects to mention that Canon C. W. Vernon, whom he introduces as a leader of the social gospel in the Anglican Church, came from Halifax. His dismissal of the Maritime Baptists as "beginning to awaken to the existence of a social problem" by 1918 but failing "to advance very far in expressing it before 1929" (p. 70) is unwarranted. Given a previous statement that "the smaller nonconformist churches failed to offer any significant programme or prospectus for Canadian society following the war" (p. 68), the "Platform" of the Maritime Baptist Convention appears an eminently respectable effort. Commissioned in 1919 and drafted

4 M. V. Royce, "The Contribution of the Methodist Church to Social Welfare in Canada" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Toronto, 1940), p. 263.

and adopted by the Convention early in 1921, it included a lengthy statement on the rights of the child and supported equal pay for women, widows' allowances, old age pensions, workmen's compensation, employees' "partnership" in industry and the organization of "all life, ecclesiastical, civic, social, industrial, on the basis of brotherhood."⁶ Similarly, Allen's surprise that Nova Scotia Methodists gave a moderately progressive response to the General Conference's reform resolution in 1919 seems to be based on nothing more tangible than the negative comments of a single non-Methodist (pp. 122-125). In fact, the manifestation of social gospel influence apparent in the Maritimes by 1919 rested upon a strong tradition dating from about the beginning of the century. The Maritimes had shared fully in the intellectual currents of the period and participated in the movements which these inspired. Social gospel theology, political activity by the churches and Christian socialism were all discussed in Maritime pulpits and in a variety of religious and secular gatherings. The Methodists, Presbyterians and Anglicans endorsed unequivocal statements of social gospel principles well before the War.⁸ The activities of Nova Scotia's Social Service Council dated from 1909 and the province's legislative record of industrial regulation and social reform did not lag significantly behind that of other provinces.

The social gospel's impact on the lives of individual Maritimers can be clearly documented. Clifford Rose, a Pictou County carpenter, credited the "discussions on Social Justice and Christian Socialism" in the local St. Andrew's Brotherhood with developing his interest in social problems before the War. He 'graduated' from these to become an active participant in the Trades and Labour Council and an organizer in labour's unsuccessful bid for power in the provincial election of 1920.⁷ W. H. Jenkins, a Baptist clergyman from New Brunswick, displayed an early commitment to social gospel principles in the report of a temperance committee which he chaired in 1903. Author of the thesis, "The Industrial System in Christian Light," Jenkins became a fiery critic of the "piracies of capitalism" and a leader of militant labour in the Cape Breton strikes of the early 1920's.⁸ Others were attracted along more moderate paths. The Maritime novelist, Grace McLeod Rogers of Amherst, Nova Scotia, a strong Conservative politically, attributed the backsliding of her son, Norman, into the Liberal Party to the social idealism of Mackenzie King's *Industry and Humanity*.⁹ H. R. Grant, fired by the reforming vision of the social gospel,

5 *Year Book, Maritime Baptist Convention*, 1921, p. 112.

6 See the Truro *Canadian Labor Leader*, 26 October 1912, and E. R. Forbes, "Prohibition and the Social Gospel in Nova Scotia," *Acadiensis*, Vol. I, No. 1 (Autumn, 1971), pp. 15-19.

7 Clifford Rose, "Four Years with Demon Rum 1925-29" (unpublished typescript, New Glasgow, 1947), p. 5.

8 W. H. Jenkins to J. S. Woodsworth, 2 June 1926, J. S. Woodsworth Papers, p. 706, P.A.C. and *The Workers' Weekly* (Stellarton, N. S.), 1 June and 27 July 1923.

9 Mrs. H. H. Congdon, interview, 9 June 1969.

resigned in 1904 from regular congregational work at Trenton, Nova Scotia, to devote his career to fulltime service in the realization of the Kingdom. For the next twenty-seven years, as one of the ablest organizers and most formidable lobbyists in the country, he came to personify the struggle for prohibition in his province. In the Maritimes, as in the rest of the country, the social gospel had an important formative influence on the religious, social and political life of the people.

It is also regrettable that a study of such importance as *The Social Passion* is not more lucidly presented. The choice of the middle period for the first volume of a projected trilogy on the social gospel creates problems in introduction. The reader is confronted with a formidable variety of individuals, organizations and ideas whose origin and background can receive but the briefest reference. Equally serious is the author's style which is characterized at times by an awkward and unusual use of language (e.g. "The churches thus prefigured the constellation of forces of a Canadian labour party" [p. 82]), convoluted sentences and a tendency to bury important ideas in masses of information.

Perhaps it is too easy to fault a pioneering work of this nature. At the time of his original research the author was working in almost a virgin field. Specialized studies were scarce, and in some regions such as the Maritimes, church records were not readily accessible. (This is no longer true of the Maritimes thanks particularly to the activity in recent years of archivists at Pine Hill Divinity Hall and the Anglican diocesan archives at Halifax.) Allen's study, available to students since its appearance as a Ph.D thesis in 1967, has already encouraged further investigation of the social gospel from the perspectives of individual provinces, churches and related movements. The gaps in our knowledge, however, are still many and varied. Until someone examines the contributions of social Catholicism to the reform tradition in Canada, Allen's work will loom on the horizon as an unintentional exaggeration of the Protestant role. Needed too are studies of the social gospel which will focus upon pew as well as pulpit, and also intensive social studies, both urban and rural, which will set the churches more precisely in the context of society and the social gospel in the movement for reform.

Allen's ambition in attempting to analyze the thought and activity of five denominations in all their regional or provincial organizations has left his work vulnerable to criticism. But it has also contributed to the book's importance as an extensive overview of the social gospel in Canada, presenting bold and sometimes brilliant generalizations which should stimulate controversy and further research.

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