

Moral Wealth and Divine Duty:

Reconciling Wealth, Morality, and Social Responsibility in the Era of American Industrialization

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History 4100: The History of the Middle Class

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In the wake of the 2024 U.S. presidential election, economic concerns—such as inflation, job instability, and income inequality—have once again taken center stage, highlighting the enduring struggles of America’s middle class. This group, defined as much by its moral aspirations as by its economic precarity, has long grappled with profound questions about wealth, responsibility, and social justice. These questions are not new; they mirror debates from the Progressive Era when the middle class emerged as an economic and moral force. Similar anxieties gripped the nation during the early twentieth century as rapid industrialization, unprecedented wealth accumulation, and an expanding gap between the rich and the working class transformed the United States into a global powerhouse, unearthing deep societal issues and divides. During the Progressive Era, as America transformed into an industrial powerhouse, a middle class emerged that faced unprecedented economic and moral dilemmas. This paper explores how the Social Gospel and the Gospel of Wealth shaped the middle class’s economic identity and moral direction and how these frameworks inform modern debates about wealth accumulation and social responsibility.

The Middle Class: A Confusing Identity

The term middle class in America has long been fluid and self-defined, with individuals identifying themselves as part of it regardless of objective criteria. A 2024 Pew Research survey revealed that while over half of Americans consider themselves middle class, this group continues to shrink—a reflection of growing economic inequality.¹ During the Progressive Era, the middle class emerged as a financial and moral force, responding to rapid industrialization and rising social tensions. This leaves us with a hard-to-define group that plays a defining role in

¹ “The American Middle Class,” Pewresearch.org, May 31, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2024/05/31/the-state-of-the-american-middle-class/>

shaping the country. Exploring the middle class's conception could take a lifetime; this paper focuses on forming America's religious middle class.

The Religious Middle Class in the Progressive Era

The religious middle class refers to a distinct subset of Americans during the Progressive Era whose economic position and moral convictions created their unique responses to industrialization. This group sought financial stability and social reform, including urban professionals, small business owners, and skilled laborers. Their faith, often expressed through Protestant church membership, gave them a sense of moral stewardship over society's direction. Unlike the wealthy elite, they lacked the financial resources to engage in large-scale philanthropy, yet they were far removed from the working poor. These ideas of a moral compass laid the foundation for the Social Gospel Movement, a reform-driven ideology aligned with the religious middle class's belief in collective responsibility and social justice. The Social Gospel arose in response to the same industrial challenges that defined this group.

The Social Gospel and the Gospel of Wealth: Competing Ideologies

Amid the economic turbulence of the Progressive Era, two contrasting ideologies—the Social Gospel and the Gospel of Wealth—emerged as frameworks for addressing the inequalities and moral questions of the time. The Social Gospel, emphasizing collective responsibility and social reform, called for systemic change to uplift the marginalized. At the same time, the Gospel of Wealth justified personal prosperity as a moral duty, asserting that wealth could be a tool for the common good. Together, these doctrines shaped public discourse around wealth and morality, influencing the development of the American middle class. This paper argues that these competing ideologies not only responded to industrialization's social and economic chaos but also contributed to forming a distinctly religious middle class in America. By examining the

interplay between the Social Gospel and the Gospel of Wealth, this paper will explore how religious and economic ideals converged during this transformative period, leaving a lasting impact on the nation's approach to prosperity, morality, and social progress.

America's history has been tumultuous, to say the least. The Civil War, from 1861-1865, may have been formally over, but it left deep scars, both physically and psychologically, all across the nation. The South, in particular, suffered from a devastated infrastructure and a shattered economy. Reconstruction, from 1865 to 1877, was an era of trying to address the rights of formerly enslaved people and how to integrate them into society. Still, the period ended with most of these efforts abandoned. In the South especially, this led to a rise of Jim Crow laws and widespread racial violence. The Equal Justice Initiative documented "Over 4,400 documented racial terror lynchings of black people in America between 1877 and 1950."² As the nation struggled with its racial and political identity, these unresolved tensions disrupted economic stability and societal cohesion, shaping the uneven development of the middle class and the broader social hierarchy that would define modern America.

Historical Context: The Rise of Industrialization and Labor Struggles

The U.S. began to experience rapid industrialization in a post-Civil War world, leading to the rise of factories, urban centers, and wealthy industrialists. Amid this economic transformation, a new class emerged: the middle class. Composed of urban professionals, small business owners, and skilled laborers, this group occupied a precarious position between the working poor and the wealthy elite. While they had achieved a degree of financial stability, they lacked the vast resources of the industrialists, leaving them unable to engage in large-scale philanthropy. Instead, the middle class sought moral and practical frameworks—like the Social Gospel—that resonated with their values and economic realities. Due to rapid industrialization in

² Jeniffer Taylor, *Reconstruction in America* (Equal Justice Initiative, 2020), 7.

cities, people began to migrate en masse, contributing to overcrowding, poor working conditions, and severe poverty for workers. Most city dwellers lived in slums, where health conditions began to deteriorate. Additionally, individual workers had little protection due to the absence of labor laws, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation in industrial factories.

As the United States evolved into a global power, many immigrants—primarily from Europe—flooded into these American cities, where most jobs were concentrated. As a result of this influx, these immigrants did contribute to the labor force, but there was increasing cultural tension and intense competition for jobs. Most immigrants found themselves in horrible conditions, often in low-paying or dangerous jobs. Around this time, the first labor movements began to emerge, primarily centered around locally organized strikes and protests demanding better wages and working conditions, a shorter working week, or an eight-hour workday. These strikes were met with violent suppression from both the employers and the government. One famous example was the Haymarket Affair in 1886 in Chicago, where a mob assembled as a “product of labor agitation.”³ These strikes, riots, and protests were not merely local but had begun to garner national attention, starting a violent enthusiasm that seemed to be found in every major city.

Religious leaders played a pivotal role in addressing tensions between industrialists and workers, often advocating for labor rights. Institutions like Jane Addams’ Hull House in Chicago exemplified this ethos, offering education, childcare, and healthcare to the urban poor, thereby addressing the root causes of inequality.⁴ Moreover, the Presbyterian Church’s 1910 declaration to promote “social righteousness” reflected the alignment of significant denominations with the

³ *Press and daily Dakotian*, May 6, 1886.

⁴ Kathryn Kish Sklar, “‘Some of Us Who Deal with the Social Fabric’: Jane Addams Blends Peace and Social Justice, 1907-1919,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 2, no. 1 (2003): 80–96, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25144318>.

labor movement's goals.⁵ These religious efforts extended to the American Federation of Labor's "Labor Forward" campaign, which used Christian rhetoric to advocate for unionization and social justice.⁶ For the religious middle class, these initiatives offered a practical framework to engage with labor issues, reconciling faith with the pressing economic inequalities of the time. These moral and practical interventions by religious leaders and institutions showcased the rising influence of the religious middle class in addressing the social turmoil caused by industrialization. However, despite these efforts, the economic instability of the late 19th century continued to deepen, leaving workers, reformers, and policymakers grappling with the broader consequences of industrial capitalism.

While the nation experienced multiple depressions and financial panics, the most important occurred in 1873 and set a chain of events resulting in the Social Gospel and the Gospel of Wealth. The first was the Panic of 1873, which triggered the Great Upheaval of 1877, widely known as the Great Railroad Strike. The Great Railroad Strike was the first nationwide labor strike, and it happened as a result of railroad companies—who had suffered significant financial losses during the Panic of 1873—cutting workers' wages for the third time in a year. It began with Baltimore and Ohio Railroad workers going on strike and refusing to do any work. This essentially halted all train operations, garnering national attention due to its effectiveness.

With time, this strike rapidly spread and was found in most major cities nationwide, including Chicago, St. Louis, etc. It was no longer merely a small protest; it had grown into a nationwide uprising. Nationwide, workers began organizing strikes and rallies, leading to violent interactions with local militias and federal troops. They began to take it a step further and destroy

⁵ Jack B. Rogers and Robert E. Blade, "The Great Ends of the Church: Two Perspectives," *The Journal of Presbyterian History* (1997-) 76, no. 3 (1998): 181–86, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23335460>.

⁶ Frey, John P. "The Ideals in the American Labor Movement." *International Journal of Ethics* 28, no. 4 (1918): 487. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2377462>.

property; one case in Pittsburgh demonstrates that as a response to a violent clash with the authorities, workers burned over sixteen buildings, hundreds of railcars and locomotives, as well as countless other pieces of property and equipment.⁷

As America grappled with the devastation of the Panic of 1873, the labor strikes, and the other economic disasters, a new social group emerged: the middle class. Positioned between the working poor and the wealthy elite, this middle class sought stability in an economy that consistently grew more polarized. Unlike the elite, middle-class Americans did not have fortunes that they could throw into philanthropy, but they also weren't like those experiencing poverty; they had achieved some degree of economic security. This newfound stability, however, brought questions about their social responsibilities.

The middle class was neither the architects of industrial wealth nor entirely dependent on it, but they still struggled with the social and economic challenges it created as wealth became increasingly concentrated, with the wealthiest 1 percent controlling more than half of the nation's wealth and income by 1890.⁸ Thus, the doctrines of the Social Gospel and the Gospel of Wealth began to appeal to different segments of society, each addressing these tensions from contrasting perspectives. Two key groups deserve highlighting: the wealthy and the religious. This is not to say that the two groups are mutually exclusive, but not all wealthy were religious, and vice versa. For those that were wealthy, they needed to be able to make sense—at least publicly—of why wealth accumulation was good. These strikes sparked moral dilemmas for the members of the religious middle class: How could a just society allow for such suffering when there was so

⁷ James A. Henderson, "The Railroad Riots in Pittsburgh: Saturday and Sunday, April 21st and 22nd, 1877," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, vol. XL, July 1928, 195-96.

⁸ Norton Garfinkle, "The Gospel of Wealth," In *The American Dream vs. The Gospel of Wealth: The Fight for a Productive Middle-Class Economy*, 47-68. Yale University Press, 2006.

much wealth? Can you indeed reconcile faith—with ideas like “God will provide”—with such extreme poverty, or do those who possess wealth have a duty to help the less fortunate?

The religious middle class, composed primarily of urban professionals, small business owners, and skilled laborers, found the Social Gospel to be a practical and morally resonant framework for addressing the social challenges of the day. However, divisions existed within the middle class. Some segments, particularly those aspiring to upward mobility, found elements of the Gospel of Wealth appealing for its emphasis on individual responsibility and self-made success. Meanwhile, others resisted both doctrines, favoring more traditional religious teachings that focused on personal piety rather than social reform. These internal divisions highlight the complexity of the middle class’s engagement with the era’s competing ideologies.

The Gospel of Wealth: Carnegie and Social Darwinism

The Gospel of Wealth, popularized by Andrew Carnegie, reshaped perceptions of wealth and its societal role. Individual success would be championed, and this movement would heavily define the moral landscape of America. The Gospel of Wealth’s origins can also be traced back to this post-Civil War Industrialization period. Big business was on the rise, and it was spearheaded by wealthy industrialists, who came to be known as robber barons. In an article in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1870, the author writes, “Why, the old robber barons of the Middle Ages, who plundered sword in hand and lance in rest, were more honest than this new aristocracy of swindling millionaires.”⁹ This comparison described a group rapidly accumulating wealth, leaving others behind and becoming increasingly unpopular.

Another movement contributed to the justification of wealth accumulation: Social Darwinism. The rationalization of this was simple: human races and groups are “subject to the

⁹ “Hardhack on the Sensational in Literature and Life,” *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1870.

same laws of natural selection as Charles Darwin perceived in plants and animals in nature.”¹⁰

The result is evident when you begin to apply this line of thinking to economic groups. The role of humans was merely to participate in a struggle where the survival of the fittest would emerge. Therefore, societies were then viewed as organisms that would evolve similarly. Class stratification was understood as a struggle to determine the fittest. There were “natural” inequalities among individuals, and the control of wealth and property was therefore correlated to inherently superior moral attributes. These “inherent virtues” included industriousness, temperance, thriftiness, etc. In a paper titled “Social Darwinism and The Businessman,” Professor Irvin Wyllie said, “Darwinism served as an ideological shield and buckler for the Robber Baron generation of businessmen.”¹¹ Understanding how these ideas influenced the Gospel of Wealth is crucial because it served as a philosophical way to reconcile the personal accumulation of wealth.

Social Darwinism heavily influenced another line of thinking connected with the Gospel of Wealth called the Scientific Charity Movement. The ideas of this movement aligned with the principles of Social Darwinism built on a concept of merit. One example of this comes from the words of Josephine Shaw Lowell, a leading proponent of the Scientific Charity Movement, who said that the “idle, improvident, and even vicious man has the right to live in idleness and vice upon the proceeds of the labor of his industrious and virtuous fellow-citizens.”¹²

However, The Scientific Charity Movement sought to organize and scientifically address poverty. The result was that people experiencing poverty were treated as individuals needing to be fixed or improved to conform to society’s norms, echoing Social Darwinism’s belief in natural

¹⁰ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Social Darwinism." Encyclopedia Britannica, October 30, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-Darwinism>.

¹¹ Wyllie, Irvin G. “Social Darwinism and the Businessman.” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 103, no. 5 (1959): 629–35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/985421>.

¹² Saveth, Edward N. “Patrician Philanthropy in America: The Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries.” *Social Service Review* 54, no. 1 (1980): 76–91. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30015802>.

inequality. Poverty was not merely a social issue but a problem stemming from an individual's failure or a lack of effort. These movements were not always explicitly interconnected but certainly influenced each other in a broader ideological context. When you look at the Gospel of Wealth and its principles, it is easy to see the influence of the other two movements.

The most significant moment in the history of the Gospel of Wealth movement occurred in 1889 when Andrew Carnegie published an essay titled "Wealth." This essay would become foundational to the Gospel of Wealth movement and is considered its central doctrine. He begins his essay by positing that society's most significant issue is not the divide between the wealthy and the poor but rather the "proper administration of wealth¹³." The rich, therefore, should be the trustees of their fortune, using it to benefit society rather than merely handing off the money to someone else to decide what to do with it.

Throughout the essay, Carnegie uses terms like "the law of competition," continuing to build on the themes stemming from Social Darwinism.¹⁴ Carnegie argues that the rich are the fittest in a capitalist system, having earned their wealth through hard work and talent, and that their success benefits society. This perspective underpins much of the Gospel of Wealth, which teaches that wealth is a sign of divine favor and a moral responsibility to be used for good. The idea that financial success is a form of spiritual blessing aligns directly with Carnegie's belief that the rich are best positioned to shape the future of society. This is where we begin our first look at the religious tone in the Gospel of Wealth.

In Carnegie's vision, however, there is a clear emphasis on personal responsibility and stewardship over generosity. Toward the end of the essay, Carnegie says, "To leave at

¹³ Andrew Carnegie, *The Gospel of Wealth*, (CARNEGIE CORPORATION OF NEW YORK, 2017), 1.

¹⁴ Carnegie, *Wealth*, 3.

death what he cannot take away, and place upon others the burden of the work which it was his own duty to perform, is to do nothing worthy.”¹⁵ The wealthy are urged to see themselves as stewards rather than mere benefactors, reflected in the Gospel of Wealth’s teachings emphasizing personal empowerment, hard work, and the pursuit of wealth as part of a righteous life. However, critics of the Gospel of Wealth argued that its focus on individual philanthropy often failed to address the root causes of inequality. Prioritizing the voluntary generosity of the wealthy placed systemic issues—such as labor exploitation, housing insecurity, and wage stagnation—outside the scope of reform. Walter Rauschenbusch, a leading figure in the Social Gospel movement, contended that structural changes, such as labor laws and industry regulations, were necessary to achieve true social justice. The Social Gospel provided a more practical and inclusive framework for the religious middle class, emphasizing collective responsibility and action over-reliance on elite benefactors.

There is also a merging of capitalist ideology with spiritual duty, which creates a framework in which prosperity is not just an earthly reward but a divine mandate. This concept continues to influence prosperity teachings today. Carnegie claims that “The ‘Gospel of Wealth’ but echoes Christ’s words.”¹⁶ There is an apparent attempt to reframe the wealthy as morally correct. This is not unintentional, and Carnegie has an uphill battle to convince the swaths of American Christians that the rich are performing their duty to God. He addresses this when he quotes Matthew 19:24, which talks about how it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter Heaven.¹⁷

This passage from the Gospel of Matthew is vital to understanding the conflicting viewpoints of the Social Gospel and the Gospel of Wealth. It was a race to provide an ethical

¹⁵ Carnegie, *Wealth*, 36.

¹⁶ Carnegie, *Wealth*, 37.

¹⁷ Carnegie, *Wealth*, 37.

understanding of wealth and poverty. Carnegie notes, “In Christ’s day, it is evident, reformers were against the wealthy. It is nonetheless evident that we are fast recurring to that position today.”¹⁸ He is correct; there was an uphill battle for the elite to appeal to the religious sense of the majority. Even before the Social Gospel was formally articulated, key Christian thinkers were already grappling with the moral implications of wealth.

For instance, John Wesley delivered a sermon in 1872 on the “three rules of Christian prudence” around five years before widespread literature on a Social Gospel existed. In this sermon, he lays out his three rules, “Gain all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can.”¹⁹ Interestingly enough, Carnegie’s gospel seems to align with these principles. Andrew Carnegie himself is documented to have lived the doctrine. He gave away over 350 million dollars during his lifetime, founding thousands of libraries, museums, schools, and colleges. He established trusts, foundations, and charity organizations. He lived according to the principles of Scientific Charity, believing that with strategic fixes, society could improve.²⁰

There was a problem with this, however. Due to the rising economic disparities, a new class that was not part of the lower classes emerged. They could obtain wealth, although they would need significant help to fund a library building project. While not poor, the principles of the Gospel of Wealth simply could not apply to them. Religious qualms with the doctrine aside, this group of people, the emerging middle class, needed a solution to handle their wealth and address the rising economic inequality they saw around them. While the Gospel of Wealth may have addressed how the rich should manage their money, the middle class still had these questions.

¹⁸ Carnegie, *Wealth*, 36.

¹⁹ John Wesley, “Sermon 50: The Use of Money,” (Sermon, Global Ministries: The United Methodist Church), <https://web.archive.org/web/20150402061915/http://www.umcmmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/Sermon-50-The-Use-of-Money>

²⁰ “Andrew Carnegie’s Story,” Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2015, <https://www.carnegie.org/interactives/foundersstory/#!/>.

To be sure, the Gospel of Wealth offered a justification for wealth accumulation, but its ideas did not address the unique role of the middle class. Many middle-class Americans, particularly those with strong religious convictions, sought a framework that was not limited to individual success but included a broader social responsibility. For this group, the Gospel of Wealth seemed too limited—it focused on the moral duties of the rich while leaving questions about collective social responsibility unresolved. The Social Gospel emerged as an alternative to this movement, appealing to the broader audience by emphasizing that all Christians bore a religious responsibility for social reform regardless of wealth. This approach would deeply resonate with the religious middle class because it allowed them to engage and contribute to meaningful social change.

While the doctrines of the Social Gospel and the Gospel of Wealth shaped much of the Progressive Era's middle-class identity, they did not enjoy universal support within this complex group. Some parts of the middle class, particularly those with more traditional or conservative religious values, resisted the Social Gospel, criticizing its emphasis on collective reform as a distraction from personal salvation and spiritual growth. For these individuals, the focus on systemic change risked compromising the core tenets of Christianity, which they believed prioritized individual piety over societal transformation. Archibald G. Brown, a British Baptist minister, exemplified this critique, remarking, "Among the working classes what is known as the Social Gospel has done as much harm as anything. I hate the expression Social Gospel. Sometimes I think it must have been invented by the devil." He argued that addressing spiritual needs would be the solution for moral and social improvements, asserting, "Let any man be saved from his sins, and he will be saved from dirt into the bargain."²¹ For Brown and others like

²¹ Iain H. Murray, Archibald G. Brown: Spurgeon's Successor (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2011), 120–21.

him, the Social Gospel's emphasis on systemic reform overlooked the transformative power of individual salvation and risked undermining the spiritual essence of Christianity.

Similarly, skepticism toward the Gospel of Wealth emerged among middle-class members who viewed its reliance on elite philanthropy as insufficient for addressing the root causes of inequality. Critics argued that the doctrine placed unwarranted trust in wealthy industrialists to act as moral stewards while ignoring the ongoing structural exploitation that fueled their fortunes. Some labor activists and union organizers rejected both frameworks, advocating for grassroots empowerment through collective bargaining and systemic reforms like labor protections. These divisions underscore the complexity of the middle class's engagement with Progressive Era ideologies, highlighting its role as both a beneficiary and critic of the era's economic and moral transformations.

The Social Gospel: Gladden and Rauschenbusch

The Social Gospel is still prevalent today and has had a massive impact on forming America's religious middle class. The first codified example of the social gospel can be found in a book written in 1877 by a pastor named Washington Gladden. After witnessing the violent turmoil that resulted from the strikes, Gladden believed that traditional religious teachings needed to address the rapidly industrializing society, leading to a struggling working class. As a preacher, he began to argue that Christianity should take steps to participate in societal reform. He wrote books, poems, hymns, and articles, and they preached fiery sermons, challenging the church to engage in the plight of the working class by addressing issues of labor rights, poor wages, and growing economic inequality.

Gladden may not have been the most famous social gospel reformer, but his work was crucial to the foundation of the eventual doctrine. In his book *Recollections*, he writes that

throughout his young life and into the early part of his ministry, he “watched the whole of that ominous polarization of social classes.”²² Gladden’s work was not merely limited to economics, and it is for that reason he is so influential to the social gospel. He was not just advocating for Christian thought concerning philanthropy or working hours; he was emphasizing a collective shift towards applying Christian ethics and doctrines to all aspects of life. He was speaking out against racism and segregation, improving the American education system, natural conservation, church activity, and so on.

This line of thinking is crucial to understanding the Social Gospel. It is not merely a singular approach to fixing issues. It is an all-encompassing way of thinking about society heavily influenced by Christian thought. The goal is not simply to fix a problem but to address the root cause of the problem so that it will not happen again. Additionally, Gladden was the first significant voice to rally swarms of people behind him. He championed workers’ rights and claimed employers had an ethical responsibility towards their employees. He won public opinion by bringing religious legitimacy to these economic inequalities. These were not simply societal problems but moral and spiritual issues that required immediate action. All Christians had a duty to reform societal structures.

The Social Gospel’s call to reform society deeply resonated, particularly within middle-class religious communities, who saw themselves as leading moral figures in a rapidly industrializing nation. Gladden’s work laid the groundwork for this movement, calling on Americans to address pressing social issues with a sense of religious and moral duty. As more middle-class Americans began to rally around the Social Gospel, they found a leader in Walter Rauschenbusch, a leader who would take these ideas even further. Rauschenbusch intensified the movement’s message, pleading with Christians to reform and revolutionize society in the name

²² Washington Gladden, *Recollections* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1909), 16.

of justice. For many of these middle-class believers, his vision of a “Revolutionary Christianity” aligned deeply with their growing influence in urban churches and civic spaces, igniting the Social Gospel movement’s momentum and ensuring its lasting place in American social history.

Washington Gladden had played his part, but while doing his work, he was influencing who would soon be the most prominent voice for the social gospel: Walter Rauschenbusch. In 1886, Rauschenbusch began his pastorate in “Hell’s Kitchen” in Manhattan, New York. He was serving a “poor, hurting, immigrant congregation,”²³ and as a result of his encounter with urban poverty, specifically the funerals for children he performed, he converted to the Social Gospel. If Gladden had started a fire, Rauschenbusch was about to dump gasoline on it. Gladden had been advocating for a calm restructuring of society, and in his book *Revolutionary Christianity*, Rauschenbusch proclaimed that Christianity should be revolutionary “in the manner of Jesus.”

Up to this point, the movement had been shaped by Gladden, who portrayed Jesus as a calm, compassionate teacher, delivering wisdom to the masses on a mountainside—a peaceful, measured approach to social reform. Rauschenbusch, however, sought to capture a different side of Jesus: the one who storms into the temple, overturning tables in protest.²⁴ He advocated for a more direct, forceful response to social injustice that challenged the status quo head-on rather than relying solely on peaceful persuasion. This shift called for a bolder, more aggressive activism within the movement. Rausenbusch decided that the movement would benefit from a clear theology and began to write and preach on it.

Most of his ideas came from a line of thinking based on the “trademark liberal Ritschlian school idea of Christianity,” where each Christian had two primary focuses. Eternal life was the goal of individual existence, and the kingdom of God was the goal of humanity. The coming

²³ Gary Dorrien, *Economy, Difference, Empire* (Columbia University Press, 2010), 15.

²⁴ Mark 11:15-18, New Revised Standard Version Edition Updated.

reign of God was right around the corner, and the church's goal was to be a community that transformed the world through the power of Christ. This is why it is impossible to limit the scope of the Social Gospel, which is tied to every aspect of human existence. Rauschenbusch remarked in a prayer once, “We know well that there is no perfection for man in this life: there is only growth toward perfection. . . . We shall never have a perfect social life, yet we must seek it with faith. We shall never abolish suffering. . . . At best there is always but an approximation to a perfect social order. The kingdom of God is always but coming. But every approximation to it is worthwhile. . . . Everlasting pilgrimage toward the kingdom of God is better than content stability in the tents of wickedness.”²⁵

The rise of the Social Gospel doctrines reshaped religious thought and played a critical role in forming a religious middle class in the United States. This emerging middle class was uniquely positioned to navigate these rising tensions between wealth and social responsibility, the trademarks of this rapidly industrializing economy. As industrial capitalism produced immense wealth for some but extreme poverty for many, the Social Gospel offered a moral framework for middle-class Americans to reconcile their faith with the broader social inequality surrounding them.

Religious Influence on the Progressive Party

One of the most evident impacts of the Social Gospel was its influence on the Progressive Party. The party emerged as a response to the listed economic problems that marked the early 20th century. They built their campaign intending to pursue reforms to address social injustices. It was rooted in a commitment to social welfare for all; the Progressive Party had ideals that

²⁵ “Prayers by Walter Rauschenbusch: For Night Workers, Artists, Legislators, etc.,” ArtandTheology.org, August 28, 2024.
<https://artandtheology.org/2024/08/28/prayers-by-walter-rauschenbusch-for-night-workers-artists-legislators-etc/#:~:text=We%20know%20well%20that%20there,in%20the%20tents%20of%20wickedness.>

aligned closely with the Social Gospel. Both movements viewed economic and social reforms as necessary to create a fairer society. This could be accomplished by merging moral convictions with political action to address systemic issues such as poverty, exploitation, and inequality.

The Progressive Party frequently used religious language and symbolism to frame its goals to the public, portraying political reforms as a moral crusade against social evils. This religious rhetoric resonated deeply with Americans, who now understood their faith as a call to action, echoing the Social Gospel. Progressives often referred to their campaign as a “crusade for justice” and spoke frequently of a needed “moral awakening” in American society. By reframing political action as a spiritual duty, the Progressive Party infused its platform with a sense of righteousness that appealed to the religious masses across the country.

One of the most vivid examples of this religious influence was the Progressive Party’s use of the hymn “Onward Christian Soldiers” as a rallying anthem.²⁶ The song’s imagery of marching together in a “battle” resonated with Progressives’ view of their reform efforts as a noble struggle against societal corruption and systemic injustice. Lyrics such as “With the cross of Jesus going on before” added a feeling of divine mission to their cause, symbolizing their collective effort as part of their larger righteous mission. While traditionally interpreted as a battle against spiritual sin, the Progressives reimagined this “battle” as one against “social sins”—injustices like poverty, exploitation, and inequality. For Progressive leaders, the song was not merely a hymn; it served as a unifying anthem that underscored their vision of political activism as a moral crusade, mirroring the rhetoric of the Social Gospel.

²⁶ Songs of the National Progressive Party. Dr. Danny O. Crew Theodore Roosevelt Sheet Music Collection. Dr. Danny O. Crew Theodore Roosevelt Sheet Music Collection. <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Research/Digital-Library/Record?libID=o292746>. Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library. Dickinson State University.

These religious undertones connected the Progressive Party with middle-class, faith-driven Americans motivated by the Social Gospel. By emphasizing the moral urgency of addressing key economic and societal issues—labor rights, poverty, and fair wages—the Progressive Party was able to align its platform with the spiritual convictions of its supporters. This framing allowed Americans to see political reform as civic engagement and an expression of their moral and spiritual values. By presenting these issues as "social sins" needing redemption, the Progressive Party harnessed the power of religious conviction to inspire and mobilize a diverse base of middle-class advocates. By framing these issues as moral imperatives, the Progressive Party could harness the power of religious conviction to impel their supporters.

By the early 1900s, two prominent leaders, Theodore Roosevelt and William Jennings Bryan, shaped public discourse on issues of morality and the social good. Both often invoked religious language to reinforce the moral aspects of their overall political agenda. Roosevelt, in particular, spoke of the need for moral courage and character in political leadership, and he described social reform as both a patriotic and moral duty.²⁷ Bryan, an outspoken Christian and an advocate for social justice, commonly used biblical references to argue for fair labor practices and economic reform. These leaders used religious rhetoric to help solidify the Progressive Party's image as a moral force for good, reinforcing the sense that a political agenda should be grounded in Christian Ethics, a call back to the movement of the Social Gospel.

Modern Parallels: The Legacy of the Social Gospel and Gospel of Wealth

While the debates of the Progressive era may initially seem far removed from today's society, the core questions they raised about wealth and morality are still deeply relevant today.

²⁷ 'From the Archives: President Teddy Roosevelt's New Nationalism Speech,' Obama White House Archives, December 6, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/12/06/archiveS-president-teddy-roosevelts-new-nationalism-speech>

Whether through the philanthropic actions of today's multi-billionaires or discussions surrounding the living wage and corporate social responsibility, the ideologies of the Gospel of Wealth and the Social Gospel continue to influence how citizens approach the responsibilities of wealth in modern American society. Bill and Melinda Gates embody the Gospel of Wealth through their foundation, directing billions toward health, education, and poverty alleviation.²⁸ However, critics argue that even large-scale philanthropy does not address the root causes of systemic inequality. This echoes concerns raised by figures like Walter Rauschenbusch and Washington Gladden, who advocated for structural reforms over individual acts of charity.

Modern movements, such as the push for universal basic income or labor reforms in the wake of the pandemic, can be seen as a continuation of the Social Gospel's moral imperative to address inequities through systemic change rather than relying solely on the generosity of the wealthy. As the debate rages on, the tension between the Gospel of Wealth's emphasis on individual responsibility and the Social Gospel's call for a collective societal reform remains a driving force in debates about inequality today. As leading thinkers and policymakers navigate issues such as taxation, wealth redistribution, education reform, and social justice, the underlying question remains: Should we rely on the wealthy to do good, or should society collectively take responsibility for ensuring equality for all?

Rising wealth inequality in the United States has sparked a series of popular movements, like Occupy Wall Street, which called for higher taxes on the wealthy in the name of financial redistribution.²⁹ Just as in the Progressive Era, the conflict between these two approaches is prevalent and continues to shape the discourse of wealth in contemporary American society.

²⁸ "Our Work," Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2024, <https://www.gatesfoundation.org/our-work>

²⁹ Adam Gabbatt, "Occupy Wall Street: Protests and Reaction," *The Guardian*, October 6, 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20121114143444/http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/blog/2011/oct/06/occupy-wall-street-protests-live>

Conclusion: Balancing Prosperity and Equality

The ideologies of the Social Gospel and the Gospel of Wealth provide invaluable insight into the moral and economic struggles of the middle class, both past and present. These doctrines shaped the middle class as both participants in prosperity and stewards of moral direction. Today, as debates about wealth inequality and social justice persist, these historical frameworks remind us that the tension between individual success and collective welfare is far from new. By understanding these legacies, we can better navigate modern economic challenges with the hope of reconciling prosperity with equality. The roots of these ongoing debates—whether wealth should serve individual ambition or collective good—trace back to the competing ideologies of the 19th and 20th centuries. By revisiting these ideas, we gain valuable tools for addressing the moral dilemmas of wealth inequality and social responsibility today, with optimism that society can balance economic progress with equality for all.

The emergence of the Social Gospel and the Gospel of Wealth helped establish the long-lasting moral foundations of America's middle class, embedding within them a sense of social responsibility and allowing them to maintain economic ambition. As these doctrines became established, they influenced how the middle class perceived its role in the middle—as not only a benefactor of the nation's prosperity but also as the steward of its moral direction. This legacy is prevalent, even today in modern society, where the middle class continues to navigate the tension between individual success and overall collective social welfare. Today's middle class is not unlike the middle class emerging during the Progressive Era. It confronts many of the same questions, all to reconcile personal economic stability with a sense of moral and religious obligation towards those facing financial hardship. The long-lasting nature of these ideologies

highlights their enduring relevance and importance as society wrestles with wealth, morality, and social responsibility.

The Progressive Era's economic turbulence—industrialization, inequality, and labor struggles—gave rise to the Social Gospel and the Gospel of Wealth. While both sought to address the stark contrast between the wealthy and the impoverished, they proposed fundamentally different approaches to reconcile prosperity with social responsibility. The Social Gospel emphasized a collective moral duty for all, urging the middle class to use their resources to alleviate suffering and promote justice. In contrast, the Gospel of Wealth advocated for an individual responsibility that was impossible for the middle class to live out. It served the wealthy because it championed the rich's moral and religiously justified right to accumulate wealth and direct them towards philanthropic endeavors that fixed society without fostering dependence on the rich.

These contrasting philosophies cannot be understood in a merely theoretical vacuum; they were responses to deep societal divides of the time, and they would go on to influence the development of America's social, economic, and moral landscape in the years following. Today, as Americans once again face similar economic anxieties—such as inflation, job stability, and a growing income inequality—the debates surrounding wealth, poverty, and social responsibility are as prevalent as ever. The ideologies of the Progressive Era continue to shape the ongoing conversations about the moral duties of the wealthy and the role of government and society in addressing these vast economic disparities. We may better understand and navigate the complexities of modern economic challenges through understanding these historical ideologies, as they offer valuable insights into the everlasting tension between prosperity and equality.

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