

8-1-1956

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Recommended Citation

Moellering, R. L. (1956) "Rauschenbusch in Retrospect," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 27, Article 45.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol27/iss1/45>

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Rauschenbusch in Retrospect

By R. L. MOELLERING

ON the whole, it appears that American Lutheranism was oblivious to the writings of Walter Rauschenbusch. An examination of *Lehre und Wehre*, the theological journal of the Missouri Synod during the years of his ascendancy, failed to uncover a single reference to the "prophet of the Social Gospel." When he was mentioned in Lutheran circles, he was usually stigmatized as the villain of American Protestantism. His name was associated with all the ignominy heaped on the social gospel. He became the favorite "whipping boy" for those denouncing the trend toward Modernism. Perhaps he was not given a fair hearing. At least there seemed to be no appreciation of his prophetic powers in discerning so clearly the social and religious reverberations of the industrial revolution.

Rauschenbusch, in turn, was highly critical of Lutheran aloofness from American civic life. While he could speak of a gradual awakening to social responsibility on the part of Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Episcopalians, and even Roman Catholics, he felt compelled to fault the Lutherans for their isolationism and lack of social sensitivity. He quoted President F. Pfotenhauer of the Missouri Synod as writing: "The real business of the church is to preach the Gospel. It is not the mission of the church to abolish physical misery or to help men to earthly happiness."¹ Whereas champions of Lutheranism argued that this position leaves individuals free for constructive activity in society, Rauschenbusch averred that it left them "uninstructed, and even sterilized against social enthusiasms." He accused Lutherans of burying their "ten talents in a tablecloth of dogmatic theory."²

What shall a Lutheran say in retrospect some thirty-five years after Rauschenbusch's demise? The social gospel in its extreme form has had its heyday and has long been in decline. The theo-

¹ *Der Lutheraner*, 1911, p. 150.

² *Christianizing the Social Order* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1912), pp. 24, 25, cited in this article as *CSO*.

logical atmosphere which was congenial to its growth has changed. The optimistic assumptions which looked forward to "Christianizing the social order" as the realization of our Lord's kingdom on earth have been seriously challenged, if not demolished.

Concurrently Lutherans have been aroused to a greater social consciousness. They have become a vital part of American life. Some Lutheran bodies have not hesitated to issue pronouncements on questions related to war, labor, family life, birth control, and divorce. The Lutheran Human Relations Association of America is at least keeping pace with, if not outstripping, the most progressive thinkers on the race question among American churchmen.

With the passing of a whole generation and the diminution of the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy, it is possible to view Walter Rauschenbusch with a new perspective. Taking a "new look," we can attain a more balanced view which gives credit where it is due and censures where it is necessary. Thus even a "conservative" Lutheran may find himself admiring Rauschenbusch's penetrating and accurate analysis of the far-reaching changes taking place in the structure of American life around the turn of the century, while he is more than ever aware of some of his misleading premises and theological deficiencies.

It will be the main purpose of this treatise to delineate what we regard as Rauschenbusch's chief contributions to the problem of how Christ's followers must relate themselves to society and how he has interpreted theology to correspond with his view, not neglecting to mention areas where in our judgment he has erred. While one must marvel at his ability to grasp the implications of the social revolution for the Christian Church, one must also deplore the fact that he deliberately molded theology to conform to his formula for a new order.

I

RAUSCHENBUSCH AS A SOCIAL PROPHET AND REFORMER

The social gospel has been severely castigated for its one-sided stress on the salvation of society. Rauschenbusch was aware of this danger and frequently cautioned against "flying off on a tangent." Already in 1907 he complained about the preachers

who were so absorbed in the new movement that they regarded all other Christian truth as "stale and outworn in comparison."³

Rauschenbusch always tried to preserve a careful balance between the individual and the social aspects of religion. He asserted that there were two great entities in human life—the human soul and the human race. Both are vital concerns of Christianity. While the social preacher is inclined to underestimate the necessity for individual regeneration, the evangelical preacher is apt to ignore the Christian's responsibility for improving the social order. Although Rauschenbusch complains that "our individualistic religion has helped to feminize our churches," he admits that "the human soul with its guilt and its longing for holiness and deathless life is a permanent fact in religion" (*CSC*, pp. 366, 367). If "our personal religious life is likely to be sapped by our devotion to social work, it would be a calamity second to none." But he is confident that this will not happen (*CSO*, p. 104).

Social Sin

Without subscribing to Rauschenbusch's scheme of social redemption for overcoming social sin, we must concede that he succeeded in demonstrating that sin cannot be confined to overt individual transgressions of the Decalog. Moral purity in one's personal life is no guarantee that one is not a vile sinner. Rauschenbusch put the spotlight on the ugly aspects of social wrongs and illustrated how the selfishness of respectable people perpetuated these wrongs.

He argues eloquently that the ethics of modern commerce are hostile to the teachings of Christ, and he explains the reasons why he has come to this conclusion. The social duty of love is in flat contradiction to the natural selfishness of human nature. Competitive industry appeals to self-centeredness. Business which tries to outbuy and outsell the opposition resorts to dishonest and rapacious practices. In order to produce the maximum amount at the minimum cost it procures a labor force at the cheapest possible wage. The workers must submit or lose their livelihood. The mass of industrial workers are sentenced to tedious jobs which dull their minds and squelch their aspirations. They are compelled

³ *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1908), p. 365, cited hereafter as *CSC*.

to live in squalor and misery without any security against sickness or accident. Women and children are exploited in the labor market, and the lives of future citizens are jeopardized.

The man living in comfort and ease in the suburbs may not be a drunkard or an adulterer, but nonetheless he is involved in the guilt of a vicious economic system which reduces his fellow man to a mere cog in a machine.

Rauschenbusch portrayed the social dimensions of sin more lucidly than it had ever been done before. No wonder that Amos was his favorite prophet! With the full application to modern life he quoted Amos' scathing denunciations of the profiteers in ancient Israel: "Woe to them . . . that lie upon beds of ivory . . . and eat the lambs out of the flock and the calves out of the midst of the stall." (Amos 6:1-4.) — "Ye have turned justice into gall and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood" (v.12). "They sold the righteous for silver and the poor for a pair of shoes" (2:6).

Rauschenbusch was no armchair philosopher when he sized up the social evils of his days. His keen sense of economic injustice was the outgrowth of both study and direct experience. One summer, while working on a farm in New York, he overexerted himself stacking hay until bodily fatigue caused his head to fall over on his shoulders. For a day's work he was given twenty-five cents and not enough to eat. From this time Rauschenbusch dated his opposition to long hours of wearisome toil.⁴ While serving for eleven years as a minister among tenement dwellers in New York City, he was an eyewitness of the debilitating and demoralizing effects of grinding poverty and unemployment. We have a vivid description of his experiences:

Working among a downtrodden class, as he visited the crowded, dingy homes of his people, he saw little children who were underfed, families unable to buy the necessities of life, young men turning to crime in order to obtain food. He saw honest, earnest men unable to find work, others who labored long and hard hours for wages still insufficient to provide decent security for the children at home. He saw families disgracefully housed, poorly fed, trying to eke out an honest existence, hounded by bill

⁴ Does Robinson Sharpe, *Walter Rauschenbusch* (New York: Macmillan, 1942), p. 40, cited hereafter as (WR).

collectors, pressed for clothes enough to keep them warm in winter and clean in summer. He saw the heads of these families, Christian mothers and fathers, weighted down with worry and hardship until they were broken in mind and body and died worn-out long before completing a normal life span. Only a few blocks away from the tenements of these hard-pressed people were the lavishly expansive mansions of the rich, who, luxuriating on their divans and making the rounds of extravagant parties, presented a cruelly vivid contrast to the people of Rauschenbusch's parish.⁵

His conviction was strengthened that there were innate defects in the capitalistic system that made it sinful per se.

In a prayer for employers the champion of social reform pleaded that they might not abuse their tremendous power: "When they are tempted to follow the ruthless ways of others and to sacrifice human health and life for profit, do Thou strengthen their will in the hour of need, and bring to naught the counsels of the heartless. Save them from repressing their workers into sullen submission and helpless fear. May they not sin against the Christ by using the bodies and souls of men as mere tools to make things."⁶

Thus while most preaching was still pommeling individual infractions of the divine Law, he was instructing Protestants on "the superpersonal forces of evil."⁷ The fact that Lutheran pulpits are more conscious today of organized corruption and fraud is undoubtedly due to some extent to the social-gospel movement which at the time they so vehemently rejected. In this respect at least we owe a debt of gratitude to men like Rauschenbusch. They have increased our awareness of social guilt and called our attention to the demonic tendencies in our most vaunted political and economic institutions.

The Social Prophet

Perhaps no churchman of his day had Rauschenbusch's perspicacity in diagnosing his age. This does not mean, however, that his prognostications have been a hundred per cent accurate.

⁵ Paul Lambourne Higgins, *Preachers of Power* (New York: Vantage Press, 1950), p. 42.

⁶ *Prayers of the Social Awakening* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1909), pp. 61, 62.

⁷ *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1918), pp. 69—76, here abbr. TSG.

Something of a miscalculation was involved, for instance, in his prediction that when the free lands were exhausted, injustice would be unavoidable. Those who arrived first, Rauschenbusch said, would become a privileged class. Those who followed would have no soil of their own. They would become an agricultural proletariat offering the strength of their bodies in exchange for bread. However—and this is something Rauschenbusch could not foresee—modern technological inventions have resulted in an immense increase in crop productivity, while most of the population growth moved to the cities to find employment.⁸

Some of the conspicuous evils which Rauschenbusch berated have been largely removed by legislation or popular pressure, but some of them still bedevil our lives.

A Preacher of Social Justice

His role as a preacher of social justice reaches its high point when he inveighs against "the reign of the middleman." With business under the compulsion of seeking ever higher profits, he says, the consumer is the victim of endless tricks and devices designed to make him buy what he does not really need or what is of little value. It is difficult for the buyer to protect himself, for he has no way of determining the genuineness of the products being sold. The average customer does not know how much wool or silk there may be in the goods advertised as such. Some manufacturers can tamper with the quality of goods without being detected. He mentions, for example, that five gallons of kerosene could be used with every forty gallons of turpentine and not be discovered by the unwary buyer. Since kerosene cost only five cents a gallon while turpentine cost eighty-six cents, the schemers made an extra profit. He furthermore decried the fraud of arousing false expectations to lure shoppers into stores. "Fire sales and bankrupt stocks are advertised to unload old stuff. At mark-down sales the tags are marked up before the old price is crossed off." With the extravagant claims made in this age of radio and television for many kinds of products, we can still

⁸ Similarly Karl Marx did not foresee that modern technology would raise the living standards of the workingman.

concur in his judgment that "the lies told in advertising are like the sands of the sea, which no man can number" (*CSO*, p. 208).

Monopolies are the objects of some of Rauschenbusch's most trenchant attacks. With illustrations from gas companies, the coffee industry, and the sale of beef, he shows how monopolies can raise prices with impunity and create artificial scarcities to gain exorbitant profits. He cites facts and figures to prove that the Pullman Company, in spite of paying large dividends to stockholders, continues to accumulate large surpluses. As long as the ownership of the stocks is distributed among high officials of the railroads, he is sure they will fight to maintain their monopoly. Meanwhile, the ordinary people who must pay the high fares are being exploited. "Thus the consumer is between the Scylla of competition and the Charybdis of monopoly. If he is under competition, he is bitten by fraud; if under monopoly, he is devoured by extortion." (*CSO*, p. 220.)

Rauschenbusch was among the first to sound the alarm with regard to the depletion of our natural resources. The selfish instinct of capitalism, which wants to satisfy its urge for immediate gains, is not, he holds, concerned about the long-range preservation of timber lands or mineral deposits. He sees in the very rise of the conservation movement a "national confession" that capitalism "is a national peril" (*CSO*, p. 254).

A Christian Sociologist

The basic Christian institution threatened by the expansion of capitalism, he asserted, is the family. There is nothing which disturbs him more than the breakdown of the home. Before many Christian ministers had heard of the new science of sociology, he provided an outline on the causes of marital discord and family instability worth studying even today. Industrialism in the large cities, he says, wedges the workers together in tightly compact masses. The wages earned are not sufficient to permit private ownership. The hardships which large families must endure deter many from marriage. When the wife and children are compelled to work to make ends meet, the home loses its meaning. Exhaustion and discouragement lead to drinking and quarreling. The sex urge, which can be noble and beautiful, is

perverted into an instrument of vice. He denies that the increase in prostitution is due to any preference for immorality. Although a number of factors contribute to its spread, the main cause is our economic life. All the depressing circumstances surrounding the life of a workingwoman conspire to break down her resistance. "The long hours, the lack of comforts, the low pay, the absence of recreation, the sense of good times all about her which she cannot share, the conviction that she is rapidly losing health and charm, rouse the molten forces within her."⁹

A Moderate Socialist

Although Rauschenbusch wielded an acrimonious pen and administered blistering rebukes to the entrenched bourgeois interests of his day, he was not an extreme radical. He was not a member of the Socialist Party. Though he echoed some of Marx's criticisms of capitalism, he did not share his belief in a cataclysmic revolution. He was not ready to endorse the socialization of everything, and he was vigorously opposed to the atheism and materialistic approach of the Marxists. In the British and German Democratic-Socialist movements, closely aligned with co-operatives, he found ideals more closely akin to his own design for a Christian commonwealth in which approximate economic equality for everyone might be attained. But cultural advance and religious development for all humanity were included in his prospectus.

Some of the preliminary conditions already exist, Rauschenbusch was convinced, upon which a collective society might be based. In Western Europe and in America there is a large measure of political democracy. The necessary scientific technical knowledge has been acquired. "The only question is: Have the spiritual forces of humanity gained enough conscious purpose and continuity of action to overcome the sinful obstructive forces which will fight this development?" (*WR*, p. 201.)

Precisely what does Rauschenbusch have in mind for a new society? First of all, he advocated that the important, large-scale means of production should be socialized and required to serve

⁹ *CSO*, pp. 266, 267, quoting Jane Addams, *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil*.

the public good. The unearned rental values of land should be socialized, even though the title might be left in the hands of individuals. All natural resources which belong to the land, such as mines, oil wells, water power, and harbor facilities, should be completely socialized.

He favored outright public operation over private enterprise. He pointed out that every step toward limiting the profits of business by means of higher wages or increased taxation is already a partial socialization of business, as is also insurance against sickness, old age, and unemployment. There must be an increase of public functions. Such Governmental services as the postal system should be extended to milk, drugs, and provision for the burial of the dead as well as to recreation, roads, and public utilities.

When it came to a consideration of how socialism should be initiated and implemented, Rauschenbusch was emphatically a gradualist. A sudden revolution, he feared, would catapult inept leadership into control. Although he accepted the general outline of the Marxian theories of surplus value and the class struggle, he thought that these essential truths were overestimated by their proponents. "Religion," he wrote, "is the only power which can make socialism succeed if it is established. It cannot work in an irreligious country." (*WR*, p. 217.)

II

RAUSCHENBUSCH AS A THEOLOGIAN

The Kingdom of God

Rauschenbusch's social philosophy cannot be assessed properly by us unless we understand that it was grounded in his religious outlook. His concept of the kingdom of God became the synthesis between religious individualism, which was central in his training, and the new social enthusiasm which gripped his imagination. The origin of the idea of a kingdom of God he found in the theocratic ideal of the ancient Hebrews. The prophets "conceived of their people as a gigantic personality which sinned as one and ought to repent as one" (*CSC*, pp. 8, 9). Men like Jeremiah and Amos, who championed the poor and denounced national sins,

provided ample grist for Rauschenbusch's mill. He delighted in their vituperations against ceremonialism and dead formalism—the same criticisms he leveled against the traditional churches of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His study of the Gospels persuaded him that "all the teaching of Jesus and all His thinking centered about the hope of the Kingdom of God. . . . All human goodness must be social goodness." (CSC, p. 67.) The ethical platform for the Kingdom he found particularly in the Sermon on the Mount.¹⁰ When a man is immoral, he is antisocial. The fundamental virtue for Jesus was love, because "love is the society-making quality." Jesus was a sociable Person who drew people into affable conversation. He refused to accept any kind of caste system which would ostracize the poor, or the ignorant, or the tax collectors, or some types of nonconformists, from the rest of human society. Many of His parables had to do with social meals. The ritual of the Lord's Supper originally centered in a "social meal." When His disciples quarreled about their rank in the Kingdom, He reprimanded them by informing them that the one who served the most would be the greatest. To give them a striking object lesson in the subordination of self to the service of the community, He washed their dusty feet. The kingdom of God was the ideal human society which Jesus expected would be established.

The church is the chief agency through which the Kingdom is to be promoted, but the kingdom of God itself is something infinitely greater. It is bringing all of human life into harmony with the will of God. We should think of it as a divine democracy rather than as a totalitarian state. It starts with the individual, the man or woman who freely accepts the principles of Christ, who seeks "first the kingdom of God and His righteousness." Whoever does this has entered the Kingdom. But his salvation is imperfect because the society in which he lives is imperfect. Hence every aspect of corporate life must be adjusted to be in accord with the royal law of divine love. Each family unit, the national state, and the economic order must all be Christianized and stamped with the divine character. When the Kingdom

¹⁰ *The Social Principles of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1916), p. 56.

comes to full fruition, it means that the will of God will be done on earth as it is in heaven. (*WR*, pp. 220—230.)

All religious concepts and experiences must be reinterpreted and reformulated to fit into the Kingdom framework. This re-evaluation of traditional dogma is the task to which Rauschenbusch addressed himself in his book *A Theology for the Social Gospel*.

The Doctrine of God

His treatment of the doctrine of God may be used as an introductory example. "The conception of God held by a social group is a social product" (*TSG*, p. 167). An exalted idea of God is "a social achievement and a social endowment." When people have groaned under the yoke of slavery or have been oppressed by a tyrannical government, they have been inclined to look upon God as a stern and angry autocrat. Jesus "democratized" God, and the Reformation tended to reassert His view of God as a loving and forgiving Father. Luther's emphasis on justification by faith was "an emancipating idea," but it still used the terminology of legalism. "The Social Gospel is God's predestined agent to continue what the Reformation began" (*TSG*, p. 177).

Progress in social improvement is the way in which God reveals that He loves righteousness and hates wickedness. In a prayer "for the Fatherhood of God," Rauschenbusch expresses his appreciation of the more noble concept of God which has seeped into Christian experience: "All our soul within us is glad because we need no longer cringe before Thee as slaves of holy fear, seeking to appease Thine anger by sacrifice and self-inflicted pain, but may come like little children, trustful and happy, to the God of love."¹¹

It is in his attempted reconstruction of theology that Rauschenbusch is most vulnerable. Instead of undergirding the superstructure of his social philosophy with a solid theological foundation, he stands convicted of undermining it with fatal weaknesses. Indeed, it might be argued with all seriousness whether he did not reverse the process and endeavor to formulate a system of Christian doctrine as a sort of second upper story after the main part of the building had already been grounded in his social ideas.

¹¹ *Prayers of the Social Awakening*, p. 45.

When we recall that *A Theology for the Social Gospel* was his last major work, we cannot but wonder whether it is not a belated afterthought. Certainly, it is at this juncture that a Lutheran critique is likely to become most caustic.

Rauschenbusch's break with orthodox and historic Christian doctrine was more abrupt and extensive than he probably realized. There is evident throughout his writings a deliberate caution which does not want to throw the entire Christian heritage overboard. Moreover, he seems to have been fully convinced that he had rediscovered the essence of the Gospel, which had been perverted by the accretions of traditionalism, the misinterpretations of church scholars, and the self-interest of ecclesiastical leaders who reflected the social thinking of the privileged classes.

But the theology of the social gospel stands condemned because it is a man-made theology. It is in flat contradiction to the Christian concept of revelation. Rather than listening to the voice of God to gain direction and understanding, it tends to create a god that will conform to its own image of what God *should* be like. Reverence for the inescapable sovereignty of God is eliminated. God is apt to be reduced to the spiritual symbol for the new social awakening. It really borders on the blasphemous when Rauschenbusch asserts: "The worst thing that could happen to God would be to remain an autocrat while the world is moving toward democracy. He would be dethroned with the rest. . . . A theological God who has no interest in the conquest of justice and fraternity is not a Christian. . . . [The Christian's God] must join the social movement. . . . The failure of the social movement would impugn His existence." (*TSG*, p.178.) This approach to the doctrine of God is tinged with the creature's defiance of his Creator, which is like the clay complaining about the way in which the potter is molding it. If we were to take Rauschenbusch literally, we who live in 1956 would be obliged to declare ourselves atheists because the social order, which was supposed to prove God's saving power, has not materialized.

The Sacraments

Rauschenbusch admittedly has difficulty in fitting the Christian Sacraments into the framework of the social gospel. A high esteem

for these ancient ordinances scarcely appears compatible with an outspoken opposition to ritualism. None the less he proceeds to suggest an interpretation with a social connotation. The Baptism practiced by John and advocated by Jesus, he insists, was not designed to be an act implying individual regeneration, "but an act of dedication to a religious and social movement" (*TSG*, p. 198). When Greek thought assimilated Christianity and left its imprint, Baptism was filled with a new meaning which was not originally intended. It became necessary to cancel past guilt and achieve salvation. At this point Rauschenbusch's Baptist bias becomes evident, as he sees this change confirmed by the spread of infant Baptism. To instill a new purpose into Baptism which will make it significant for the new era, he recommends that it be connected with the idea of making an exit from the kingdom of evil and an entrance into the kingdom of God. In other words the candidate for Baptism would be pledging himself to take a stand against social wrongs and work for the establishment of God's rule on earth.

Rauschenbusch takes similar liberties in making the Lord's Supper serve the social gospel. The reason why Jesus instituted this memorial feast was to maintain the loyalty and cohesion of His followers so that they would persevere in carrying forward His ideals. The social character of the fraternal meal was debased by the intrusion of class divisions in the congregation at Corinth. One of the most effective methods of discipline in the early church was to prohibit offenders from attending Communion. The humiliation and sacrifices which penitents were willing to endure to be restored to the full solidarity of the church show what strong social feelings were involved.

When a present-day minister celebrates the Lord's Supper, Rauschenbusch advises that he tie it up with the social hope of the world: "In the midst of a world full of divisive selfishness we thereby accept brotherhood as the ruling principle of our life and undertake to put it into practice in our private and public activities. We abjure the selfish use of power and wealth for the exploitation of our fellows. We dedicate our lives to establishing the Kingdom of God and to winning mankind to its laws. In contemplation of the death of our Lord we accept the possibility

of risk and loss as our share of service." (*TSG*, pp. 206, 207.) The Sacraments are not vehicles for dispensing God's supernatural grace and forgiveness. In the hands of Rauschenbusch they become devices which men can manipulate to suit their own aims.

Eschatology

Rauschenbusch deplors the lack of an eschatological outlook among the liberal theologians. He agrees with the school of thought which says that it was the hope of Christ's immediate return which dominated the life of primitive Christianity. The return of the Lord would signal the inauguration of the kingdom of God. Jesus had not completed His mission while He was here on earth. The consummation was yet to come.

Although Rauschenbusch would not share all the literal interpretations of the millennialists, especially the visible presence of Jesus on earth for a thousand years, still he is highly sympathetic toward their point of view. He blames St. Paul for removing all social elements in his predictions of things to come and finding salvation in the annihilation of the material world. The Apocalypse of St. John affords him an eschatology more apropos to the social gospel. There is an intermediate stage of salvation before the new heavens and the new earth appear, and even then this new mode of existence is centered in a renewal and refashioning of the old earth. Rauschenbusch bemoans the decline of the millennial hope because it "is the social hope of Christianity." It is akin to the expectancy in ancient Israel of the Messianic age of prosperity and restoration. It is parallel in many ways to the dreams of the Utopian socialists. (*CSC*, pp. 103—108.)

The social gospel is presumed to be capable of filling the void in modern theology which has been caused by the neglect of eschatology. The new teaching "seeks to develop the vision of the church toward the future and to co-operate with the will of God, which is shaping the destinies of humanity" (*TSG*, p. 210). The climax of this development will be the Day of the Lord and the last Judgment. We should understand the belief in the resurrection as an outgrowth of the feeling that the righteous who "died before the inauguration of the new order were entitled to a share in the common happiness" (*TSG*, p. 212). Demonology

was a religious expression of political hatred and social despair. Because the doctrine of purgatory had become an economic issue, it was possible for the Reformers to successfully suppress it. As long as society endorsed inhumane prisons and cruel punishments, it could tolerate the doctrine of an eternal hell. As soon as our penal system becomes remedial, aiming at the social rehabilitation of offenders, mankind will not give approval to an unremitting perdition.

In all fairness to Rauschenbusch it should be mentioned that he did not stress the social hope of humanity to the complete exclusion of the individual hope for immortality. "To the individual, Christianity offers victory over sin and death and the consummation of all good in the life to come. To mankind it offers a perfect social life, victory over all the evil that wounds human intercourse, satisfaction for the hunger and thirst after justice, equality, and love." (*WR*, p. 249.)

But again Rauschenbusch has been subjective and arbitrary in his selection of portions of Scripture to blend with his ideal. When he attaches so much significance to eschatology while rejecting the traditional views, he reveals himself as the partisan of a current theological fancy. Biblical Christians would protest that he has utterly misconstrued some of the plain teachings about the hereafter. There can be no doubt that he has departed a long way from the real intent of Christ and the Apostles. There is more eisegesis than exegesis in his treatment of Bible references. Some evangelical Christians might add that his respect for science has led him to draw the superficial conclusion that the cosmic conceptions of the Biblical writers are antiscientific, whereas they can better be explained as prescientific.¹²

The Atonement

Any Lutheran review of the theology of Rauschenbusch would include a close scrutiny of his doctrine of the Atonement, and at no point will the examiner be more dissatisfied. Here the theology of Rauschenbusch is most offensive to evangelical Christians, and yet it contains elements of truth. As we might expect, the

¹² Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), p. 77.

starting point for Rauschenbusch is to inquire: Does the death of Christ have any relationship to the social problems which disturb us?

The explanations of men like Anselm, Luther, and Calvin are peremptorily rejected. It is a mistake to say that Jesus bore our sins by imputation or sympathy. The obstacle to a better understanding has been our stubborn individualism. The solution of the problem lies in the recognition of solidarity. Christ lived, as we do, in the midst of the kingdom of evil. He aroused the opposition of vested interests and hostile social forces. The collective sins of the people ensnared Him and destroyed Him. That this makes Rauschenbusch's doctrine of the Atonement antithetical to that of historical Christianity is most plain from his own words: "Jesus did not in any real sense bear the sin of some ancient Briton who beat up his wife in 56 B. C., or some mountaineer in Tennessee who got drunk in A. D. 1917" (*TSG*, p. 247). But, he contended, Christ did go to the cross because of the public sins of organized society which were operative then and are operative now and "are causally connected with all private sins." We are linked to the guilt of the past in so far as we have repeated — by calculated action or by passive assent — the same sins which crucified Jesus.

Rauschenbusch elaborates at some length on religious bigotry, the combination of graft and political power, the corruption of justice, the mob spirit, militarism, and class contempt as the sins which combined to kill Jesus. The pathetic figure of Pilate yielding to Jewish threats reminds him of how the upper classes and various pressure groups in the modern situation can influence judicial procedure. With a clever satirical jibe he proposes that Pilate's washbowl be declared a mystic symbol as the counterpart of the Holy Grail. The fact that crucifixion was an ignominious death reserved for transgressors from the lowest classes evokes a discourse on the evils of our class divisions. They are unabashedly denounced as a characteristic mark of the kingdom of evil.

But how does Christ's death affect God and change His relation to humanity? At this stage in his description of the Atonement, Rauschenbusch demands that we view the death of Christ as "an integral part of His life" (*TSG*, p. 260). In His death and

in all the events leading up to it, He learned fully the divine attitude toward malignant sin. Entering into that attitude, He made it His own and thus revealed God at the point where the sin of the world and the mind of God were in sharpest opposition. What is the divine position in regard to sin? It is composed of opposition and love. God never yields to evil, but He is always patient with those who perpetrate it.

The death of Jesus may be viewed as the completion of His achievement of personality. He learned through suffering. But it was also an important experience for God. This is conceivable if we understand that God is immanent in the life of humanity and most of all in such a personality as Jesus. Rauschenbusch almost seems to be saying that not only the human Jesus develops into a more sympathetic and concerned Person, but God Himself progresses to a higher level of goodness as He shares in the weal and woe of His creatures: "If the principle of forgiving love had not been in the heart of God before, this experience would fix it there. If He had ever thought and felt like the Jewish Jehovah, He would thenceforth think and feel as the Father of Jesus Christ. If Christ was the Divine Logos—God Himself expressing Himself—then the experience of the cross reacted directly on the mind of God." (*TSG*, p. 264.)

Rauschenbusch propounds another way in which we might conceive the effect of Christ's life and death on God. As long as humanity is engrossed in the kingdom of evil the opposition of God is incurred, though He desires to be loving and helpful. But Christ, wearing the garb of human flesh, lived fully in the consciousness of God and was in complete accord with His holy will. As the first human Person to attain unity of purpose with God, and as one who attracted others to share His realization of God, He started the kingdom of God. Now God, who can see this embryonic beginning of His kingdom through to its completion, knowing that man can finish what Jesus has begun, can take a different attitude toward humanity. He is favorably disposed and pronounces His benediction on the goal which Christ set out to attain and which we are left to complete. But the Atonement as a vicarious act in which Jesus gives His life as a ransom has nothing to do with it.

In answering the question: "How did the death of Christ affect men?" Rauschenbusch makes three assertions. First, he says that the death of Christ "was the conclusive demonstration of the power of sin in humanity" (*TSG*, p. 264). We cannot take a lighthearted view of evil when we see the cross as its horrible end. So today the first act of vice may seem exciting and harmless, but the final outcome may be deadly.

In the second place, the death of Christ was the supreme demonstration of love. Even if Jesus had died a natural death, His principles would have been remembered and highly valued. But the heroic character of His death underscored everything which He had stood for and enhanced the effectiveness of everything He taught.

The third influence of the death of Christ on men was that it reinforced "prophetic religion." The priest is the middleman in religion who has a selfish interest in his class and is likely to exploit Christians. The prophet wants no selfish monopoly. He has reached his position through some personal experience of God, and he wants to convey it to others. Both types are present in religious bodies, but the prophet is the predestined advance agent of the kingdom of God. The cross compels reflection on the value of the prophets because this is the most conspicuous example of prophetic suffering.

"Social redemption is wrought by vicarious suffering" (*TSG*, p. 267). The parable of the vineyard in which the servants of the Master are beaten up by the tenants shows that in spite of their suffering and rejection they were the moving force in the progress of their nation. The suffering Servant of Jehovah depicted by Isaiah is a type of all those who are despised and misunderstood in their crusade for the kingdom of God. Everyone who is dedicated to the achievement of God's will on earth must bear his cross. Therefore the cross should be viewed as "a social principle."

What shall we say about this approach to the Atonement? As in almost every doctrine which he treats, he is revamping it to make it a vehicle for the spread of the social gospel. He reduces the Atonement to a scaffolding for the erection of more of his social ideas. As he does this, he displays once more the breadth of his social vision and a dearth of real theological acumen.

Since he has rejected the orthodox version of sin, since he does not believe that sin saturates the depths of man's being, since he takes sin seriously only in its social outcroppings and presumes that man is otherwise unaccountable, he has eliminated the necessity for a divine sacrifice. The vicarious atonement, in which God Himself suffers to redeem the human race, is to him incredible and irrelevant.

Further Critique and Summary

1. The basic criticism of Rauschenbusch, which must be injected into any Lutheran evaluation, is that like so many interpreters of Christianity he has set up an objective and ideal according to his own image (*Ich-Theologie*) and tried to compel God to conform. He does not fall on his knees at the thought of sacred revelation. Rather than listening for the voice of God and submitting to His sovereign will he has evolved a god who can be manipulated to fit human desires and needs. No matter how noble the aspirations of the social gospelers may be, they have no right to identify the product of their finite minds and limited vision with the sure and unfailing purposes of the omnipotent and omniscient God. They lack the awe and reverence with which Moses and the Prophets view the majesty of God.

2. The question may arise as to what Rauschenbusch's treatment of God does to His immutability. His God does not seem to be the God of Isaac and Jacob nearly so much as the God who is ready at the beginning of the twentieth century to meet the social crisis and help inspire men to solve it. His portrayal of Christ is not that of "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever." It is not that of the Gospels because it exaggerates out of all proper proportion the prominence of "social teaching" in the life of Jesus.

3. As the neo-orthodox never tire of reminding us, Rauschenbusch and his school of thought made the fatal blunder of positing a potential "goodness" which natural man does not possess. They were naive in their acceptance of the inevitability of progress. In this respect they sounded like determinists. Their faith in the assured advent of the kingdom of God on earth made them speak of it as if it were indubitable. This, in turn, was

an outgrowth of their optimistic view of man's potentialities. Few would argue that subsequent events have not been disillusioning on this score. The beautiful dream of an equalitarian society minus economic depressions and warfare has been ruthlessly shattered.

4. Rauschenbusch and his followers nevertheless called attention to an aspect of Christ's teaching which had been sorely neglected in the established churches and which has received much more consideration since the social gospel made its appearance and offered its testimony. Those who have encountered in an existential way most of the social evils which aroused Rauschenbusch's ire, as some Lutheran ministers have in recent years, cannot help admiring the heroic stand which Rauschenbusch took. His description of inadequate housing, political conniving, and demoralization in the congested areas of our urban centers still holds. Any minister who tries to bring Christianity to people in the sordid surroundings hovering over the inner city must soon be convinced that he cannot ignore all applications to social and political life if he wants to be truly representing the Master. Kenneth D. Miller reports the observation of one city church in a deteriorated neighborhood: "It is doubtful if a congregation can worship in the midst of a population that has ten per cent truancy, rats biting children and traffic maiming them, and not experience dry rot unless it becomes concerned about them."¹³ The record of the Lutheran Church in this regard is not an enviable one. Our condemnation of Rauschenbusch's theology should not blind us to the helpful contribution which he has made especially in arousing the conscience of Christendom to sympathize with the plight of the dispossessed and to see the dangers implicit and explicit in an unrestrained form of capitalism. We should learn from Rauschenbusch that we cannot wash our hands of social responsibility, and we cannot "save" people in the fullest sense without coping with a multitude of complex and baffling social problems.

5. Yet, when everything favorable to the social gospel has been mentioned, and our debt of gratitude has been acknowledged,

¹³ *Man and God in the City* (New York: Friendship Press, 1954), p. 111.

we must say that its this-worldly emphasis becomes a distortion of the Gospel and is not a true reflection of the Christian hope. "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable" (1 Cor. 15:19). Rauschenbusch has forgotten that the early church was built on the belief in the resurrection and not on a common urge to found a new community. As followers of Jesus we are still in the world. We are not exempted from the responsibility of striving for a better social order. In fact, Christians should make it part of their vocation to be in the forefront of peace movements and the struggle for social justice. In so far as it is possible we should help fulfill the petition of the Lord's Prayer: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Rauschenbusch was eminently successful in appealing to Christians along these lines. But when we have done our best and we still seem to fail; when the world continues to follow its wicked course; when we witness two world wars with all the resultant evils; when we hit our heads against a stone wall of opposition and collapse in weary defeat; when life's little day comes to an end and everything we worked for goes up in smoke; when an atomic war breaks out and destroys all our vaunted "progress"—then what? It seems to the writer that this is Rauschenbusch's greatest weakness. Here he leaves us cold and dry. Although he does not deny the possibility of personal immortality, his theological system tends to make it inconsequential.

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