

*Respectable Radicals: Christian Socialism in Early Twentieth Century
Upstate New York*

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Introduction

In 1851 a wealthy Protestant manufacturer in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania named Stephen Colwell authored what would eventually be recognized as the intellectual foundation for Christian socialism in upstate New York – and elsewhere – by the early part of the twentieth century. While denying that he was a socialist, and nevertheless advocating a Christian-based restructuring of capitalism, he said in *New Themes for Protestant Clergy* that

In the eye of the Christian, all men constitute one brotherhood, and there is no avoiding the conclusion to which this truth leads. The poor have as much right to live as the rich; and the rich are equally bound to help them . . .

Colwell then goes on.

How, then, can those who have wealth, or power, or influence, or wisdom, or knowledge, refuse to entertain as the great question of their lives, - What shall be done for the permanent amelioration of the condition of the poor?

He then added this:

That in any possible state of society there must always be paupers, cannot be doubted; but in every society where Christian duties are discharged with even moderate faithfulness, the poor will be reduced to the smallest number possible.

New Themes for Protestant Clergy proved to be the first in a series of nineteenth century works equating Christianity with socialism. Indeed, twenty years after its publication Colwell played a key role in the establishment of the first Chair of Christian Ethics discernible in an American Protestant seminary – in this instance at Princeton. The breaking of new theological ground at Princeton was part of a wider effort among some Protestant leaders to construct an organized religion openly espousing the cause of labor. A year later, in 1872, the Christian Labor Union was formed in Boston, and this was followed by a growing number of books advocating the Christian socialist position. Notable here was one written by the Reverend Franklin M. Sprague in 1893. Entitled *Socialism From Genesis to Revelation*, it proposed that Christianity in practice was fundamentally incompatible with capitalism. Dedicating his book to the “Laboring Classes and to the Great Principles of Industrial Democracy and Social Justice,” he maintained that

Socialism is a new science of political economy. Its object is to realize the ethics of the religion of Jesus Christ in the possession of economic goods. The capitalistic system, by its gross inequality in the distribution of wealth, has come to be an arch enemy of this ethical principle.

The works of Colwell and Sprague joined with the efforts of other Protestant clergy concerned about the repercussions of a rapidly industrializing America. Among these was W.D.P. Bliss, an ordained minister who joined the Knights of Labor in 1886. In the following year he was one of the principal organizers of the Society of Christian Socialists. His argument that this Society had as its objective the goal of educating people to see that Christianity and socialism had the same goals, and that the very teachings of Jesus logically lead to socialism, was captured in his 1890 publication entitled *What is Christian Socialism?* Here William Dwight Porter Bliss does not mince words when he states that “we turn above all else to Him who has been called ‘the first Christian Socialist,’ the

Carpenter of Nazareth.” Another minister, the Congregationalist George D. Herron, was even more politically radical in his support of the Socialist Labor party and the open advocacy of a synthesis between Marxism and Christianity. In his 1893 publication of *The New Redemption: A Call to the Church to Reconstruct Society According to the Gospel of Christ*, his portrayal of class conflict bears a striking similarity to that of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. “As I look anxiously and prayerfully into the future,” Herron told his readers, “I see the men who work and the men who own, labor and capital, marshalling themselves upon opposite sides of a conflict that may bring woe to all that dwell the earth.”

Between Colwell, Sprague, and Bliss, on the one hand, and Herron on the other, there were a host of other Christian socialists whose voices were being heard as America entered the twentieth century. In upstate New York, as we shall see, one of the most eloquent and prolific of those voices was Rochester’s Walter Rauschenbusch. Theologically and politically located somewhere in the middle – right of Herron, and left of Colwell, Sprague, and Bliss, this Professor of Church History at the Rochester Theological Seminary – and ordained Baptist minister and late of New York City’s Second German Baptist Church where he ministered to the poor in a depressed neighborhood – Rauschenbusch took his followers deep into the heart of what he saw as the moral darkness of a capitalism that produced profound human misery, as he described it in his 1917 book *A Theology for the Social Gospel*. The exploitation of the worker, as Rauschenbusch viewed it, created ill-gotten wealth that was made worse by inheritance:

I know a woman whose father, back in the nineties, (who) took a fortune out of a dirty mill town. She is now living on the fortune; but the children of the mill-hands are living on their misfortune. No effort of hers can undo more than a fraction of the evil which was set in motion while that fortune was being accumulated.

He then goes on in the starkest of terms:

Upper-class minds have been able to live parasitic lives without any fellow-feeling for the peasants or tenants

whom they were draining to pay for their leisure.
Modern democracy brings these lower fellow-men
up to our field of vision.

Rauschenbusch concludes with this:

Then if a man has drawn any real religious feeling
from Christ, his participation in the systematized
oppression of civilization will, at least at times,
seem an intolerable burden and guilt. Is this morbid?
Or is it morbid to live on without such realization?
Those who today are still without a consciousness
of collective wrong must be classified as men of
darkened mind.

Rauschenbusch speaks “of (a) darkened mind.” Such criticisms of the business community – especially when it came from religious leaders – were powerful and dangerous. As we shall see, the critiques of Christian socialists produced a political counter-offensive among other Christian leaders in the early twentieth century. Prominent here was Princeton Theological Seminary’s Charles Erdman. A Professor of Practical Theology and a Presbyterian minister, he conceded some of the social and economic problems generated by capitalism, but was quick to add that capitalism also contained members of the business community concerned with justice and honesty – values which Christian socialists hardly had a monopoly on. Indeed, the Christian principles of thrift, honesty, and hard work was what produced wealth. Accordingly, Erdman urged for a realization that successful capitalists were neither greedy nor exploitative. Instead, they were hard-working entrepreneurs creating opportunities for themselves and for other, thus benefitting society as a whole.

We will return to such opposition later in this talk, and that is especially so when we consider in some detail the heresy trial of the Reverend Algernon Sidney Crapsey held in Batavia in 1906. This was a concrete, specific reaction to the thinking of an ordained Episcopal minister who served at the St. Andrew’s Mission in Rochester and who authored *Religion and Politics* in 1905. It was this book in

particular that prompted the heresy trial – and his removal from St. Andrew’s. In such chapters as “The Commercialized Church in the Commercialized State,” he offered a trenchant critique that inevitably drew the ire of more conservative Christian leaders long worried about Christian socialism. For instance, he wrote in the aforementioned chapter of this:

“See, there is the great Schwab,” said a businessman of New York to me one day. “Why the great Schwab?” said I. “Because he is under forty years old, and he is worth so many millions of dollars.” “So,” said I, “did he earn it by honest toil?” “Oh, no!” “Did he inherit it?” “Oh, no!” “Did he steal it?” “Well, no!” “How did he get it?” “He made it.” Then I looked at Mr. Schwab with interest. He was greater than the United States, which cannot make a dollar of money, while Mr. Schwab could make it by the million.

Crapsey then goes on to add that

It is this doctrine that money can be made that is the source of our present distress. The old doctrine that money must be earned, inherited, or stolen gives place to the new doctrine that money can be made; and there are thousands of men who are making it as easily as they light a cigar . . . This rating of man in terms of money is the mark of (the) Anti-Christ, for a man’s life does not consist in the amount of money he has made.

Despite the intensity of the debates about Christian socialism within the Protestant community in the years leading up to the First World War, one theme remained constant – while many of the concerns were about a social and economic inequality having a terrible effect upon the working class – the conversation remained a very middle class one. These were relatively comfortable and socially respectable people on either side of the debate about

where industrialization in America, indeed, in upstate New York, should go into the future.

Accordingly, I have organized this brief exploration of respectable radicals into a number of themes. Each of these motifs offers an introduction to one of the more fascinating – and overlooked – aspects of upstate New York history. In Section Two we will make a foray into the principal ideas of Christian socialists. Here it will be necessary to probe the meaning of socialism for such leaders as Rochester’s Professor Rauschenbusch – and how it differed from the Marxian socialism of this period *and* blended into their notions of Christianity. This will take us into Section Three. Here, we will examine Christian socialism not as a set of ideas but instead as a lived movement. How did Christian socialists strive to make the Protestant church a center of socialist activity? Such an analysis leads to the obvious – what of those Christians, such as the Reverend Erdman and his local counterparts, who *opposed* this understanding of the teachings of Jesus?

That concern in Section Four will lead directly into the meaning of Reverend Crapsey’s heresy trial in Section Five. The trial itself – and its immediate consequences – will usher us into a discussion of the implication of all of this for us today. It is that concern that will occupy us in Section Six. Therefore, let us turn now to the main ideas of Christian socialism as they appeared in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The Emergence of Christian Socialism

The 2016 Presidential campaign in the United States was noteworthy because of the normalization of the term “democratic socialism” by a serious contender for the Democratic Party nomination, Senator Bernie Sanders. Long at the margins of American political culture, the term “socialism” was at best a reference to very marginal third parties and at worst a suggestion of affinity with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics – which for many Americans was anathema. But the term “socialist” – indeed, the idea of socialism – looked very different in the United States prior to the Bolshevik Revolution in Czarist Russia in the fall of 1917. In fact, by the early twentieth century the intellectual and even the moral climate of the United States were such that there was much more of a

willingness to discuss the place of socialism in a modern industrial society. For many Americans, socialism did not equal a denial of democracy. In fact, for that segment of the population it meant a fulfillment of democracy. That segment of the populace included a sizeable percentage of Protestants serious about their Christianity – and equally serious about their objections to what they perceived as a betrayal of traditional American notions regarding democracy and community via the introduction of a new industrial order.

As already alluded to, Stephen Colwell was one of the earliest Christian leaders to attempt a synthesis of Christian thought and socialism so as to develop a cogent critique of capitalism. In his *New Themes for Protestant Clergy* he set forth what he meant by socialism – or at least one with a decidedly Christian twist.

To begin with, he urged his readers to accept the idea of revolution. The emergence of a truly Christian society required the transition to a fundamentally new social order. Nonetheless, he stressed this:

No violent revolution is required. No despot is to be hunted from his place; no blood is to be shed; no legislation is indispensable; no new sect in religion or philosophy need be formed, nor, in the first instance, need anyone desert the position in which Providence placed him.

How, then, would change take place? For Colwell and numerous Christian socialists following him, it was a relatively simple matter of personal transformation:

What is required is, that everyone who is, or believes himself to be, a true disciple of Christ, should at once resolve so far as in his power, and so far as he might be favored with divine aid, to live in this world according to the teachings of his Master.

Therefore,

As soon as the great law of doing to others as we would others should do to us begins to be exemplified, the reign of wrong, and and injury, and extreme suffering will come rapidly to an end.

But the peaceful, gradual revolution endorsed by Christian socialists as early as Colwell in 1851 still begs the question – what precisely was the socialist society to look like? More narrowly, what form would the Christian variety of socialism in America take? To answer that question a clear distinction needs to be made between the “scientific socialism” emerging in the nineteenth century and the Christian socialism under consideration here. Simply put, the former is a product of the writings of Marx and Engels, who sought to distance themselves from the rest of the socialist camp. For them, the eventual triumph of socialism – a stage on the path to communism – resulted from a historical dynamic in which capitalism, in economic terms, self-destructed under the weight of such economic “contradictions” as a declining rate of profit and the problem of overproduction and too little consumption. While they had ethical objections to capitalism, it was their concern with an economic system that could not last forever that really dominated their thought.

On the other hand, Christian socialists, while having obvious economic concerns, were always more focused upon an ethical critique of capitalism that, as they saw it, was inherently unjust. Accordingly, they stressed the need for what some called a “brotherhood of humanity” in which the wealth generated by capitalism would be shared by the population as a whole. For Christian socialists, the *lack* of wealth is not the problem. Instead, the problem is rooted in control. For example, in Rauschenbusch’s seminal 1913 publication of *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, he argued that Jesus had addressed the problems associated with the consolidation of wealth by a handful of people:

Like all the greatest spiritual teachers of mankind, Jesus realized a profound danger to the better self in the pursuit of wealth. Whoever will watch the development of

a soul that has bent its energies to the task of becoming rich, can see how perilous the process is to the finer sense of justice, to the instinct of mercy and kindness and equality, and to the singleness of devotion to higher ends; in short, to all the higher humanity in us.

Which for Rauschenbusch led to what he called in this work “the present crisis:”

The ideal of our government was to distribute political rights and powers equally among its citizens. But a state of such actual inequality has grown up among the citizens that this ideal becomes unworkable. According to the careful calculations of Mr. Charles B. Spahr, one per cent of the families in our country held more than half of the aggregate wealth of the country, more than all the rest of the nation put together.

As a result, Christian socialists – to one degree or another – advocated the public ownership of those sectors of the economy that affected the greatest number of people. The Congregationalist minister Washington Gladden, in such publications as *The Chautauquan* in 1899, urged the creation of public ownership of what he termed “natural or virtual monopolies.” Of course, the obvious question then is yet again connected to control – how would such public trusts be managed? The answer here reminds us of their concern with democracy – and how to maintain it in an era of sharpening economic inequality. Christian socialists tended to argue for a direct election to the openings on a public trust’s governing board – with the proviso that salaries should never be greater than the average wages of the period. They were suspicious of large organizations and stressed the necessity of local control; a control that some saw as anchored in the realities of the first century within which Jesus lived. A stark example of this is discernible in Reverend Crapsey’s *Religion and Politics* and his reference to upstate New York:

In the opinion of many of the leading members

of our communion the dignity of the Episcopal office depends upon the extent of territory over which the bishop presides, and upon the wealth of the church expressed in property and contributions.

This perception is rooted in a deeper belief embedded in American society:

The American, and indeed the modern, is prone to confound greatness with bigness. Measured by this standard the life of Jesus was most insignificant, the country through which He preached was no larger than Monroe and Ontario counties combined, and the town that he made his home not so large as Canandaigua.

Small administrative units, a mixed economy of public and private ownership, along with direct electorate control would go a long way towards the perpetuation, and recapture, of political democracy. So too would as much public control as possible over technological development and, indeed, the technologies that were already in place. Like other socialists, many Christian socialists viewed technology as offering huge possibilities for the improvement of millions of lives. Automation was a positive development that was harmed because an unbridled pursuit of profit created such phenomena as job loss. In their understanding, the key here was once again control – a small number of owners who dictated what the social consequences of technological development would mean. The answer was to convert narrow private interest into a wider public good. We once again return to Rochester's Rauschenbusch in *Christianity and the Social Crisis*:

The factories, the machines, the means of transportation, the money to finance great undertakings, are fully as important in the modern process of production as the land from which the raw material is drawn. Consequently the chief way to enrichment in an industrial community will be the control of these factors of production; the chief

danger to the people will be to lose control of the instruments of industry.

Therefore, as Reverend Rauschenbusch adds,

That danger, as we saw in our brief sketch of the industrial revolution, was immediately realized in the most sweeping measure. The people lost control of the tools of industry more completely than they ever lost control of the land. Under the old system the workman owned the simple tools of his trade. Today the working people have no part nor lot in the machines with which they work.

He then concludes that

In capitalistic production there is cooperation between two distinct groups: a small group which owns all the material factors of land and machinery; a large group which owns nothing but the personal factor of human labor power.

This, then, is a brief sketch of what the vision of American society looked like for Christian socialists. It was an idea in which all of the wealth being created by industrialization would be used by more than simply small elites capable of fulfilling their individual potential while the majority struggled to make ends meet. For them, it was about ending want, wars, and a constant cycle of economic crises. As Rauschenbusch put it in a chapter of *Christianity and the Social Crisis* entitled "What to Do:"

The force of the religious spirit should be bent towards asserting the supremacy of life over property. Property exists to maintain and develop life. It is unchristian to regard human life as a mere instrument for the production

of wealth.

But talking about what is wrong and what should be is one thing. It is quite another to propose concrete ways for getting to a better world. It is this aspect of the Christian socialist program that we now turn our attention to.

Christian Socialism as a Social Justice Movement

The Christian socialist movement in upstate New York was more than a simple exchange of ideas. It was instead a concrete attempt to change American society for the better – at least as they saw it. Their effort to alter American capitalism took four specific forms. The first of these was the development of a Protestant Church that was not mere “churchliness,” as Rauschenbusch once termed it. The effort also took a second form in the struggle to build a mass movement permeating all aspects of American society. Thirdly, Christian socialists had much to say about the emergence of the United States as a world power in the wake of the Spanish-American War. For them, imperialism held the potential for impeding the expansion of American democracy here at home. Finally, Christian socialists stressed a rejection of rituals that they saw as undermining traditional Protestant practice. Along with the rejection of excessive ritualization, they enthusiastically advocated youth programs fashioned to cement a socialist future. With all of this in mind, let us turn initially to the idea that Christian socialism inherently stood in opposition to “churchliness.”

For there to be a Christian socialist *movement* – in lieu of a mere academic exchange of criticisms of the status quo and how best to fix or replace it – Christian socialists maintained that the church had to be deeply and widely immersed in American society. In other words, there had to be movement beyond the perpetuation of an ecclesiastical organization concerned principally with the cause advancing the church as an institution. The church, they argued, should not replace the quest for a Kingdom of God which, for Christian socialists, translated into a socialist America.

A principal spokesperson here was Professor Rauschenbusch. When he wrote *Christianity and the Social Crisis* while teaching at the Rochester Theological

Seminary he talked at length of how “churchliness” impeded “the work of social reconstruction.” Speaking of the necessity of placing Christian ethics above the needs of the church per se, he said that

Christian morality finds its highest dignity and its constant corrective in making the kingdom of God the supreme aim to which all minor aims must contribute and from which they gain their moral quality.

While having the medieval Catholic Church in mind, the implication for twentieth century Protestant churches was obvious:

The Church substituted itself for the Kingdom of God, and thereby put the advancement of a tangible and very human organization in the place of uplifting humanity. By that substitution the ethical plane of all actions was subtly but terribly lowered.

Rauschenbusch was not the only Christian socialist arguing for a Christianity whose objective was to radically alter American capitalism. It appeared elsewhere in upstate New York. For instance, we can once again return to Reverend Crapsey's *Religion and Politics*. Quoting the pamphleteer Gerrit Smith, the reader is informed that

We are told that a church should not meddle with politics. There is, however, nothing on earth that should give it more concern. Politics, rightly interpreted, are the care of all for each, - the protection afforded by the whole people to every one of the people; and hence a church might better omit to apply the principles of Christ to everything else than to politics.

Such Christian socialists as Rauschenbusch and Crapsey maintained that their movement, for it to have any chance of success, must by definition be a mass movement. This meant that there was a concerted effort to accomplish such goals as the public ownership of utilities through success at election time. Ironically, on this point, Christian socialists bore an uncanny resemblance to Engels, one of the originators of “scientific socialism.” Like German Social Democrats in the late nineteenth century, Christian socialists sought the creation of a broad-based party that rejected the notion of a pure and faithful minority. They were seeking to reach out to as many Americans as possible who would benefit from a socialist transformation of American capitalism. Christian socialists striving to implement change could only do so when supported by a mass party that embodies values that stood in stark contrast to capitalism. As Rauschenbusch captured this in a chapter of *Christianity and the Social Crisis* entitled “The Church and the Social Movement:”

Every great movement which so profoundly stirs men, unlocks the depths of their religious nature, just as great experiences in our personal life make the individual susceptible to religious emotion. When the chaotic mass of humanity stirs to the throb of a new creative day, it always feels the spirit of God hovering over it. The large hope which then beckons men, the ideal of justice and humanity which inspires them, the devotion and self-sacrifice to the cause which they exhibit – these are in truth religious.

The goal of building a broad-based party of Christian socialists tackling the problems produced by an industrial order was one that also looked outward. To one degree or another, Christian socialists were strongly opposed to the growth of American imperialism by the early twentieth century while, simultaneously, remaining committed to missionary work abroad. For them, missionary work did *not* constitute imperialism. But a military and/or corporate presence abroad generally *did* constitute an unacceptable meddling in world affairs. Writing in

Christianity and the Social Crisis, Rauschenbusch asserted that “wherever militarism rules, wars are idealized by monuments and paintings, poetry and song.” He then elaborated at length:

The stench of the hospitals and the maggots of the battle-field are passed in silence, and the imagination of the people is filled with waving plumes and the shout of charging columns . . . If war is ever to be relegated to the limbo of outgrown barbarism, we must shake off its magic.

He then spoke of how very few wars were undertaken in order to advance some notion of justice or even to benefit the population at large. He then echoed a view seen in the writings of other Christian socialists:

. . . personal spite, the ambition of military professionals, and the protection of capitalist ventures are (all) the real moving powers.

Decrying the few who control capitalism, he then added this biting critique:

. . . the governing classes pour out the blood and wealth of nations for private ends and exude patriotic enthusiasm like a squid secreting ink to hide its retreat . . .

Hence there was a clear connection between America’s behavior abroad in a military sense and developments at home. But he, like other Christian socialists, did not limit the view of imperialism to narrow military action. It was also extended to American business behavior in foreign lands. Rauschenbusch once again expressed this in the clearest of terms:

Trade made the way for missions, but traders also frustrated Christianity. Today commerce is bearing down on the non-Christian nations with relentless eagerness, breaking down their national independence at the cannon’s mouth, breaking up their customs and

tribal coherence, industrializing them, atomizing them, and always making profit on them.

Here we see the Christian socialist critique of the culture of capitalism. At the same time Rauschenbusch and other Christian socialists are expressing this view, so too are other upstate Christians of a more conservative bent. For example, look at the official minutes of the nineteenth session of the Genesee Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1899:

The constant tendency of the secular to trench upon the sacred domain of the spiritual has always been felt. It is nowhere more manifest today than in the attitude of the secular world toward the Christian Sabbath, a civilization that calls for railway systems three thousand miles long, with such complicated and gigantic business interests that man sometimes becomes but a cog as it were . . .

But what have human beings become a cog in? This collection of conservative ministers goes on to add that far too many human beings have become a cog

. . . in the vast machinery that grinds on without interruption . . . The attitude of disregard in which the day is held by thousands of businessmen, and the calm indifference of some church members, present an alarming situation.

For Christian socialists in particular, the key to transforming American values increasingly anchored in capitalist culture to those of a Christian socialist nature lay in the development of the aforementioned broad-based political party. It was a movement necessarily tied to an ethical basis that eschewed as many formal rituals as possible. "Ritualism," Rauschenbusch asserted in a chapter entitled "The Work of Social Reconstruction" in *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, "numbed the ethical passion of primitive Christianity." He then added that the "parasitic growth of ritualism and sacramentalism on the body of Christianity is one great historical cause why Christianity has never addressed itself to the task of social

reconstruction.” That “social reconstruction,” rooted in the people, must target the future by focusing upon young people, and it must utilize such institutions as the schools to do it. Rauschenbusch spoke of the necessity of compelling “teachers to develop the communistic spirit in the children, though they may not call it by that name.” In *Christianity and the Social Crisis* he then said this:

. . . the three great institutions (home, school, and church) on which we mainly depend to train the young to a moral life and to make us all good, wise, and happy, are essentially communistic, and their success and efficiency depend on the continued mastery of the spirit of solidarity and brotherhood within them. It is nothing short of funny to hear the very men who ceaselessly glorify the home, the school, and the church, turn around and abuse communism.

Such perspectives were also appearing among Christians who only a short time earlier had not identified with Christian socialism. An illustration from upstate New York quickly makes this point. Only a year later, in 1900, the official minutes of the Genesee Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, meeting in North Tonawanda, reveals an increasingly militant attitude regarding capitalism. The ministers pointed out that the “combination of capital has been met by (a) combination of labor and justice (that) is demanded; not pity nor charity.” Accordingly, the mass-based party, through “the pulpit,” “should be in close touch with workingmen . . .” They went on. “As ministers,” (we) must be in sympathy with the aspirations common to humanity. There should be a closer bond of union between the Church and the working classes.” The ministers gathering in 1900 in North Tonawanda then said this:

The unchurched population of our cities has no bitter word against Jesus Christ nor against religion itself, but much to say against the impractical character of much of our work as a Church, our silence on economic and social problems, and the attitude of many of our wealthy members.

Needless to say, “the attitude of many of our wealthy members” found a voice in those members of the Christian community who rejected Christian socialism and heartily endorsed capitalism. It is those critics of the critics that we now turn our attention to.

Christians in Opposition to Christian Socialism

Christian socialists precipitated a divide in Protestantism that went to the heart of the question – what should be the direction of industrial America as it entered the twentieth century? Protestant conservatives asserted repeatedly that the desire to synthesize teachings found in the Bible with socialism were clearly in error. Be it the aforementioned Princeton theologian Charles Erdman or the New York native Samuel Plantz in such works as *The Church and the Social Problem* (1906), anti-socialist Christians maintained that one did not have to be socialist to mount the same criticisms of capitalism that non-Socialist Christians routinely undertook. One did not have to identify as a socialist to object to hunger, hopelessness, or poverty. A person could work to make the world a more just and humane place *without* resorting to socialism. As the *Official Journal and Minutes of the Eighty-Sixth Session of the Genesee Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* in 1895 put it at their Rochester meeting in a session of the Freedmen’s Aid and Southern Educational Society:

Your Committee is most deeply convinced that the church of God in this country has no more sacred and important work than to assist in lifting the millions of the South Land to a higher type of Christian manhood and intelligent citizenship.

Therefore,

No better work is being done anywhere than by the Society in its schools in the Southern States. Hundreds of ministers, thousands of teachers, have been sent out to lead their people.

Positions taken by such non-socialist Christians reveal the belief that one could address wrongs in American life and still maintain capitalism. Non-socialist Christians argued that socialists such as Rauschenbusch – and a multitude of others – falsely accused the churches of uncritically supporting capitalism. In contrast to Christian socialists, non-Christian socialists disputed the depiction that early Christian society was socialist. When Jesus advocated justice, love, and fellowship, it was done as a series of general ethical principles that are not the sole possession of socialists. Since Christian socialists can offer no proof that they have a monopoly on such principles as justice, fellowship, and love, they cannot claim the right to construct a political movement based on principles shared by all Christians.

In economic terms, non-Christian socialists were deeply suspicious of any public ownership of any kind of activity – such as utilities – because it invested too much power in the state. The fear was that this governmental regulation could be extended to other spheres of society. In the process, tyranny could ensue. Poverty and other forms of inequality needed to be addressed – but that could better be done through private initiatives such as the aforementioned Freedman’s Aid and Southern Educational Society. Any tampering with private property, non-socialist Christians maintained, would inevitably lead to a tampering with schools, families, and even private morality itself. We can see this expressed in the non-socialist Christian reaction to the deep depression of the early 1890s. In the *Official Journal and Minutes of the Eighty-Fourth Session of the Genesee Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, held in Buffalo in 1893, ministers of a conservative bent were determined to address the suffering produced by the steep economic downturn without resorting to socialism, or anarchism, as they referred to it:

The church of Jesus Christ has the sole remedy for the economic ills that afflict society. The law and the gospel of the Testaments are the only things that can work a final solution of the great problems that confront us. All anarchistic schemes are essentially materialistic.

The ministers then added this:

In their appeal to pretended natural laws they provide for and practically sanction industrial slavery. Christianity alone paves the way for equality and freedom through fraternity and charity.

Therefore, they concluded that ministers committed to maintaining the status quo and to the alleviation of the worst excesses of capitalism are in no need of socialism. “To be leaders worthy of the name,” the audience was told, “they (Christian leaders) must have a thorough knowledge of human need and an adequate appreciation of the peculiar adaptation of Christian ethics to the situation.”

In their opposition to Christian socialism, non-socialist Christians saw the former as both impractical and idealistic. The implementation of socialism – however mild the degree – would give government too much power, impede progress by undermining productivity, and, simultaneously, harm the incentive to work. In addition, the sheer militancy of the Christian socialist was itself threatening. When Reverend Crapsey in *Religion and Politics* compared the business community’s political influence to customers in a brothel, he embodied the threat to non-Christian socialists posed by Christian socialists:

A moral and religious man has the same grief and pain of soul in a modern political primary that he has in a brothel; in the one, as in the other, he sees the prostitution of the highest and holiest to the most degrading and basest use. In his estimation the prostitution of the functions of the state to private, personal, and mercenary ends is even more appalling and disastrous than the prostitution of women. The poison of the one may be kept within bounds, but the evil virus of the other corrupts

the whole body politic.

Such fanaticism, as non-socialists saw it, was particularly dangerous when it was displayed by the clergy. It is probably fitting that all of this came to a head in April of 1906 in Batavia. It was there that the author of *Religion and Politics* – an outspoken Christian socialist – was tried before the Ecclesiastical Court of the Protestant Episcopal Church for heresy.

*The Opposition Takes Concrete Form – the Heresy Trial of the Reverend
Algernon Sidney Crapsey*

Reverend Crapsey, born in 1847 in Ohio and dying in 1927, after which his remains were placed in Rochester's Mt. Hope Cemetery, was from a family that included abolitionists from Virginia. He was compelled to leave school because of family financial difficulties when he was eleven years old. Returning at thirteen, he then left again because he felt too old, and secured employment in a factory. In the summer of 1862, at the age of fourteen, he enlisted in the United States Army but was eventually given a medical discharge and returned to his family in Fairmount, Ohio.

Reading voraciously, he eventually left Ohio and secured work as a bookkeeper in New York City. While at this job he attended Christ Episcopal Church. Encouraged by church leaders, he eventually was able to enroll in the General Theological Seminary in New York City and after three years received a divinity degree. Ordained in 1873, he worked at Trinity Church, again in New York City. Reverend Crapsey eventually left to serve at St. Andrew's Mission in Rochester. Both he and his wife worked intimately with the people served by St. Andrew's. By 1905 he published *Religion and Politics*, which was the basis for the heresy trial he was subjected to in Batavia in 1906.

This book embodied his beliefs and placed him in clear opposition to non-socialist leaders of the Episcopal Church. On the twenty-third of February, 1906, the decision was made to issue a "Presentment against Crapsey" and to convene an Ecclesiastical Court. The court convened at St. James Church in Batavia. On May 9th the five-member court found him guilty of heresy. An appeal to the

Church's Court of Review was denied. Reverend Crapsey was informed on November 20th, 1906, that he must leave St. Andrew's. Forced out of the church, he threw himself into the work of St. Andrew's Brotherhood, a self-help group calling itself a "Mutual Benefit Society" serving financially impoverished widows, the ill, and those in other forms of distress. The Brotherhood grew to about three hundred members. Walter Rauschenbusch eventually assisted in the work of the Brotherhood, and this work continued until Reverend Crapsey's death. The need to earn more money compelled him to also lecture and even work for a time as a parole officer.

As already suggested, the basis of the trial was his publication of *Religion and Politics*. The Court focused primarily on three areas of the book and stressed these in its "Presentment against Crapsey." All three of these areas were designed to go to the heart of the Reverend's Christian socialism. The first of these was Reverend Crapsey's depiction of Jesus as a revolutionary. The second of these was the argument that the *historical* Jesus was more important – and more accurate – than the customary portrayal of him as a mythological being; at least as Reverend Crapsey saw it. Finally, the "Presentment against Crapsey" emphasized the unacceptable contention, made by Crapsey, that ethics were more important than the dictates of the church. Let us turn briefly to all three of these Christian socialist positions as revealed in *Religion and Politics*.

Reverend Crapsey did not hesitate to present Jesus as a role model for Christian socialists as one who was, for Crapsey, clearly a revolutionary. As a revolutionary, Jesus urged a very radical change in how one lived and worked. Jesus consistently questioned custom and the ways of the established order. Non-socialist Christians, such as those on the Ecclesiastical Court convened in Batavia insisted upon customs securely anchored in both church and society at large. This gave a predictability and stability to life that the revolutionary by definition challenged. In short, a Jesus exhibiting a "critical and hostile attitude toward the state," as Crapsey phrased it in *Religion and Politics*, was clearly unacceptable. A Jesus whose "condemnation led Him to conceive of a society in which none of these evils would have a place; a society in which rulers should not lord it over the people," was a political radical whose threat to the status quo in 1906 seemed all

too real – and menacing – to the clergy on the Ecclesiastical Court and to their lay followers. An example would have to be made, and Reverend Crapsey's *Religion and Politics* was just what the opponents of Christian socialism ordered.

A second theme permeating the trial was Reverend Crapsey's insistence upon what subsequent scholars came to call the "historical Jesus." The members of the Ecclesiastical Court charged him with betraying his oath of ordination to teach about a Jesus anchored in a mythology that included a Virgin Birth and a Mary who conceived by the "Holy Ghost." Crapsey's insistence upon what he viewed as historical truth rooted in a critical, scientific analysis of the available evidence was one serving to induce disbelief in an America viewed, by many non-socialist Christians, as already too secular. The Ecclesiastical Court, in its prosecution of Crapsey, focused upon such passages in *Religion and Politics* as this:

Jesus did not succeed because he was born of a virgin or because he was reported to have risen bodily from the dead. These legends concerning Him are the result, not the cause, of the marvelous success of the man. These stories were told of Him only because the simple folk could in no other way adequately express their conception of the greatness of Jesus. Only a son of God could be as great as Jesus. Only a life more powerful than death could have the strength of Jesus.

The "Presentment against Crapsey" cited the passage shown below from *Religion and Politics* in Section Fourteen, Specification One, and Charge One:

In the light of scientific research, the Founder of Christianity no longer stands apart from the common destiny of man in life and death, but he is in all things physical like we are, born as we are born, dying as we die, and both in life and death in the keeping of that same divine Power that heavenly Fatherhood, which delivers us from the womb and carries us down

to the grave. When we come to know Jesus in his historical relations, we see that miracle is not a help, it is a hindrance to an intelligent comprehension of His person, His character, and His mission. We are not alarmed, we are relieved when scientific history proves to us that the fact of his miraculous birth was unknown to Himself, unknown to His mother, and unknown to the whole Christian community of the first generation.

While Reverend Crapsey was not alarmed, many non-socialist Christians were. The removal of such important symbols as the Virgin Birth translated into a secularization of American culture serving to relegate religious belief, and the church itself, to virtual irrelevance. Such secularization also expressed itself in a key component of Christian socialism – the primacy of ethics over the church and its place in the community. Why should there be an Episcopal Church when the Brotherhood could work just as well?

It is therefore understandable why the Ecclesiastical Court rejected the primacy of socialist ethics over more narrowly Christian ones. In the “Presentment against Crapsey” Reverend Crapsey was charged with breaking this oath:

Will you be ready with all faithful diligence to banish and drive away from the church all erroneous and strange doctrines contrary to God’s word . . .

The anxiety over what Rauschenbusch in *Christianity and the Social Crisis* called “social preaching” was in reality a fear of secularization. From the vantage point of non-Christian socialists, it appeared that an increasing stress upon social and economic questions translated into a questioning of core religious tenets such as the Virgin Birth and all that it suggested in more narrow religious terms. Non-socialist Christians, in varying degrees, conceived of a God standing outside of the world. Christian socialists instead thought of a God permeating the human world

– a world they hoped to build in God’s image. For Reverent Crapsey and other like-minded Christian socialists, the Kingdom of God is here on earth – and capitalism as presently constructed stands in the way of perfecting that kingdom. There was a fundamental divide within the Christian community embodied in the 1906 heresy trial. Such Christians as Crapsey asked the obvious – why rebuild a church building if slums are simply ignored, or at least largely overlooked?

The Implications of Christian Socialism in Our Own Day

We are beginning to return to the previously mentioned 2016 Presidential election. When Senator Sanders stated openly during a televised debate before the entire nation that he was a democratic socialist, he was resuscitating, and normalizing, the place of socialism in American life. There is within a generally conservative American culture what one commentator once termed a “spirit of rebellion” that is also consistently there – but for long stretches of time lurks quietly, right beneath the surface. All that is needed is the right climatic changes for it to rise to the surface.

The “spirit of rebellion” that initiated the birth of America, and embodied in our Declaration of Independence that enshrines the idea that all people have the equal right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, also stipulate that if the government fails to ensure this, then the people retain the right to “alter or abolish” that government. As Rauschenbusch put it in *Christianity and the Social Crisis*,

The ideal of our government was to distribute political rights and powers equally among the citizens. But a state of such inequality has grown up among the citizens that this ideal becomes unworkable.

Christian socialists, in their “social preaching,” were both indicative of the persistent “spirit of rebellion” discernible in American life *and* an embarrassment to the elite, both in and out of the Christian church. Christian socialists were reminding those who wield power in the early twentieth century that the ideals of

Christianity, indeed, the ideals of America, were not simply historical curiosities. They are instead the basic principles of both Jesus and the Declaration of Independence. “We have, in fact,” Rauschenbusch maintained, “one kind of constitution on paper, and another system of government in fact.” This is part and parcel of the Christian socialist position that a Christianity concerned almost exclusively with ritual, dogma, and church buildings has little or nothing to do with the teachings of Jesus. The essence of Christianity for them was its inherent opposition to the perceived wrongs of the status quo, as Crapsey stated in yet another passage of *Religion and Politics* contained in the “Presentment against Crapsey”:

It is the constant temptation of the King-made bishop to direct his message to the Kingly ear. When the King is to be rebuked you must not ask that task of the courtier prelate, but must call in some rough rude man of the people, some man like Elijah the Tishbite, or John the Baptist, or Jesus of Nazareth.

For Christian socialists, Christianity arose from the poor and the politically dispossessed. Along the way, it was appropriated by opportunists who used it to legitimize inequality and exploitation. By the early twentieth century industrialization brought to a head the gap between the ideals of Christianity and a republican form of government *and* the realities of both. It should not be a surprise that such a moment created a crisis running deep into the Christian community. The “spirit of rebellion” had never gone away – it was just under the surface for a time. Can the same be said for 2016?

Conclusion

Despite the boundless energy of the Christian socialists in upstate New York by the early twentieth century – and we have only examined a handful of both they and their opponents – one cannot help but to acknowledge their persistence and their equally consistent pessimism. They mustered enough evidence to support their arguments, and yet, despaired about their ability to actually deliver on the

promise of a Kingdom of God on earth. Indeed, what is troubling is their evident despair about what a socialist system anchored in Christianity would actually look like. After over four hundred pages of sustained historical analysis, theological speculation, and socio-economic study, Reverend Rauschenbusch concludes in *Christianity and the Social Crisis* that in

asking for faith in the possibility of a new social order, we ask for no Utopian delusion. We know well that there is no perfection for man in this life: there is only growth toward perfection.

Notice the phrase “growth toward perfection.” Christian socialists desired radical change and yet suggested a certain fear of it. But maybe I am overstating the case. It could be that Christian socialists sensed in their position a simplicity not supported by historical evidence. Would the large-scale elimination of property really translate into the cessation of oppression and the ushering in of unprecedented amounts of individual freedom? But complicating the picture for Christian socialists was their ability to also discern in the ideas of their critics an equal unease, albeit for different reasons. For non-socialist Christians, would an adherence to the idea of limited government intervention in the marketplace really translate into both the virtual elimination of political tyranny and unprecedented amounts of individual freedom? There was enough anxiety to go around for both camps in the Christian world of early twentieth century America, and upstate New York, in particular.

Yet one theme remains to this day. Both sides sought- and seek – to struggle for victories privately thought impossible and to accept the reality of continuous struggle nonetheless. Both sides have histories that are hardly testimonies to unbridled success. Limited government capitalists have to face a past replete with inequalities of all sorts, unfulfilled individual potential, and injustices not deserved by its victims. Conversely, socialists also have to face a history filled with the same patterns. All of this indicates that progress itself cannot be assumed from either perspective. However, to end on a more upbeat note, maybe some of the answer lies in an effort to forge cooperation between the two camps. Despite the

differences, non-socialist Christians and Christian socialists do share one important commonality – their hope for a more just and humane world. That common quality was evident in the early twentieth century, and was discernible as well – despite surface appearances to the contrary – in 2016. The problem is one of workability. How does a society balance the need to meet basic material needs, and, simultaneously, maintain sensitivity to ethical concerns? The Christian thinkers and activists examined in this talk remind us, with all of their shortcomings, of what Christianity could offer to the dialogue concerning how one can best organize modern industrial society. It is therefore incumbent upon the wider non-Christian society in America to look at what this dialogue offers to them as well as we move deeper into the twenty-first century.

