

*Interdisciplinary Journal of  
Research on Religion*

---

Volume 7

2011

Article 6

---

The Social Gospel Legacy in  
U.S. Foreign Policy

S. R. Thompson

University of Washington  
Seattle, Washington

James K. Wellman, Jr.\*

Associate Professor  
University of Washington  
Seattle, Washington

---

\* [jwellman@u.washington.edu](mailto:jwellman@u.washington.edu)

# The Social Gospel Legacy in U.S. Foreign Policy

S. R. Thompson

University of Washington  
Seattle, Washington

James K. Wellman, Jr.

Associate Professor  
University of Washington  
Seattle, Washington

## Abstract

The U.S. invasion of Iraq rested on the principle that the United States had the responsibility to remake foreign countries. In this article, we argue that the rationale for this invasion is a legacy of the Social Gospel movement in the late nineteenth century. Social Gospellers believed that “Christianization” of society would occur first in the United States and then spread across the globe because of the dominance of the U.S. economy, political system, military, and Protestant religion. Scholars usually cite the Social Gospel as an heir to the pacifism of liberal Christianity. We show how recent U.S. foreign policy, particularly in the George W. Bush administration, has close affinities with the Christianization program of the early Social Gospel.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq was undertaken on the principle that the United States has the right and responsibility to occupy a foreign country and to remake that country in its own image. The Bush administration's National Security Strategy of 2002 provided the reasoning behind this principle: that there is but "a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise." In the twenty-first century, according to this view, the responsibility of the United States was to continue using its "unparalleled military strength and great economic and political influence" to carry its model across the globe for the sake of "all nations and all societies" (Bush 2002).

In this article, we argue that the idea that the United States has such a global responsibility became decisively influential in the last decade of the nineteenth century, owing in large part to activism and advocacy by religious leaders. These ministers and theologians called for Christianity to be infused into the entire spectrum of social relations and came to refer to this doctrine as the *Social Gospel*. They believed that this "Christianization" of society would first occur in the United States and then spread to the rest of the world by means of the military, capitalism, democracy, and Protestantism (Gorrell 1988).

Despite a wide range of valuable studies, scholars who have discussed the influence of religion on U.S. foreign policy have largely missed the pivotal role that the Social Gospel played in establishing global Americanization as an imperative for the U.S. role on the world's stage. These scholars tend to focus instead on other issues, such as the influence of Puritanism and the idea of "the city on the hill," manifest destiny as a doctrine of divine election, or the belief that the U.S. military is called to oppose evil, usually associated most strongly with Ronald Reagan's or George W. Bush's foreign policy. If the Social Gospel is mentioned at all in a discussion of U.S. foreign policy, it is usually cited as an early ancestor of the liberal Christianity that has uniformly opposed U.S. military interventions since the late 1960s. The Social Gospel's support for efforts to Americanize the globe through military action is thus not only ignored, but also obscured.<sup>1</sup>

The founders of the Social Gospel did believe that reform of social conditions could create a world in which all people would live together peacefully. However, they also believed that such peace was possible only through democracy and capi-

---

<sup>1</sup> An example of a recent scholarly book that portrays the Social Gospel in this way is Ira Chernus's *Monsters to Destroy: The Neoconservative War on Terror and Sin* (2006). Chernus writes of Social Gospel theology as teaching that "[t]here are no monsters—no inherently bad people—only bad conditions." Thus "no one can be written off as a monstrous evildoer, sinful beyond redemption" (Chernus 2006: 220). In his opinion, the "Social Gospel view" leads to pacifism, resting on the claim that all people, given freedom and education, can resolve international conflicts without resorting to violence. Regarding the militarism of the Bush administration, Chernus speaks not of a drive to Americanize the globe but instead of a need to demonstrate moral strength by combating evil. As we will show in this article, the two motivations work symbiotically.

talism. The peace that they envisioned and fought for was one in which American Protestantism, American power, and American social institutions were nearly perfected and ascendant in every part of the world. This doctrine constituted their version of the cultural chauvinism that permeated the elite cultures of all the great powers at the height of European and American colonialism.

At the time, most American nationalists believed that the political institutions of the United States were divinely appointed, and many among them believed that only on the North American continent were these ideals destined to be realized. Other countries and ethnicities were essentially backward and to be treated as such or left alone. What set the Social Gospellers apart from their contemporaries was their faith that all peoples could be “Anglo-Saxonized,” Americanized, Christianized, and democratized. The same belief in the universal potential of humanity justified a foreign policy that sought to remake foreign countries in the image of the United States—by military intervention where necessary. War, in this view, could thus advance the cause of peace. Accordingly, most Social Gospel ministers and theologians voiced their approval for several U.S. military interventions in the first two decades of the twentieth century, including the Spanish-American War, the occupation of the Philippines, and especially U.S. entry into World War I, which was supposed to “end all wars” (Ahlstrom 1972).

Only after the failure of the Treaty of Versailles and in the context of a general disillusionment with warfare among Americans did pacifism become dominant among leading Social Gospel figures (Ahlstrom 1972; Noble 1985). Among them was Reinhold Niebuhr, a minister who was ascending to positions of leadership in several liberal Christian organizations, such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation, that were increasingly pacifist and socialist. As several countries began to remilitarize in the 1930s, the pacifism of these organizations was expressed in advocacy against U.S. rearmament and involvement in European affairs.

By that time, however, Niebuhr had lost his faith in the possibility of world peace. The triumph of fascism in Germany, the birthplace of both his parents, had convinced Niebuhr that there was much to value and defend in the democratic capitalism of the United States. He left the Fellowship of Reconciliation in 1934, primarily over the issue of whether or not the United States should intervene in Europe (Merkley 1975). By the end of the 1940s, Niebuhr was arguing that democracy and capitalism, while flawed, should be spread as widely as possible because they were the only way of opposing communist “demonry.”<sup>2</sup>

Thus American liberal Christianity and Reinhold Niebuhr both shifted away from the original vision of the Social Gospel, the former toward pacifism and the latter toward militancy. Yet each retained an element of that original vision. Liberal Christians reemphasized the dream of world peace while relinquishing

---

<sup>2</sup> See pages 165, 170, 172, and, especially, 173–174 of Reinhold Niebuhr (1952).

their belief that spreading the American model could make that dream a reality. Niebuhr, on the other hand, gave up the belief in world peace but came to value an international project of Americanization above all other goals, as had the early Social Gospellers.

A belief in the moral superiority and universal applicability of American political and economic practices was integral to the leading liberal theologies of the early twentieth century. Niebuhrians maintained this belief even as they sought to disown their Social Gospel heritage. Furthermore, Niebuhr and the early Social Gospellers shared a vision of an Americanized globe and believed that the use of military power in the pursuit of that goal was required by God. Behind their vision lay an inclusive and religious Americanism,<sup>3</sup> which claimed that American political institutions were divinely appointed for people everywhere and that it was the mission of the United States to bring them to the world.

The project of Americanizing other countries has become central to U.S. foreign policy as practiced by both political parties. It is the idea that lay at the heart of the George W. Bush administration's National Security Strategy, and it has been referenced by President Obama as well, on the most global of stages. Global Americanism derives from a strain of U.S. Protestantism that was influential in the late nineteenth century and was carried by Niebuhr into the early part of the Cold War era. It is this lineage of belief that we intend to demonstrate in this article.

### *THE INCLUSIVE AMERICANISM OF THE SOCIAL GOSPEL*

A focus on social conditions rather than personal problems was what set the Social Gospellers apart from other Protestants in the United States during the latter years of the nineteenth century. In the Social Gospel, "society became the subject of redemption." Evangelists from every denomination had long advocated for reforms that could be made on an individual-by-individual basis, such as stopping the consumption of alcohol. It was only in the late 1880s that theologians in Europe and the United States began to insist that "Christianity has a social mission to transform the structures of society in the direction of social justice" (Dorrien 2010: 3). These men made use of the methods of the newly founded social sciences, especially sociology. They dreamed of a Christianity that would address the social conditions of poverty and inequality that they believed both

---

<sup>3</sup> Americanism is a fluid and contested concept and has no universally accepted definition. Here, it means simply a belief that U.S. political institutions uniquely exemplify the way that society should be ordered, though who is and is not to participate in these institutions and receive the liberty they provide is always in question. This belief need not rest on the premise that the American model reflects the will of a higher power, known either through observation of the "natural" order established by that will (deism) or through revelation.

reflected and gave rise to personal sin (Marty 1970). The essential point for the Social Gospellers was simply that personal salvation and social salvation were inseparable (Gorrell 1988).

These thinkers were driven, at least in part, to search out new ways of thinking by the new realities of an industrializing country. Whereas the Dickensian nightmare of the poorhouse had accompanied industrialization in England, slums spread in the wake of industry throughout the United States. Those of Chicago and New York attained the greatest infamy. Middle-class Protestants began moving to the suburbs, fleeing not only poverty, but also millions of immigrants who had arrived primarily from majority-Catholic homelands in Eastern Europe, Ireland, and Italy (Herring 2008).

Walter Rauschenbusch, who would become the most important figure in the Social Gospel movement, set out as a young minister to care for the Protestants who were also entering the United States at that time, primarily from Germany. In 1886, he became pastor of the Second German Baptist Church in New York. His church was located in Hell's Kitchen, a slum that had arisen among the slaughterhouses and factories on the West Side and became known for its incessant gang activity (Rouse 2004).

In the face of the suffering he saw around him, Rauschenbusch felt that his preaching was less than adequate, and he reached out for resources that would make him equal to his charge. He digested a large quantity of theology, both orthodox and liberal, but his pastoral vision drew most heavily on secular authors as diverse as Leo Tolstoy, Karl Marx, and the socialist Edward Bellamy. What primarily drew Rauschenbusch into the tradition of Social Christianity, however, was the influence of two pastors of the previous generation who were reaching the height of their powers as the nineteenth century drew to a close: Washington Gladden and Josiah Strong (Evans 2004). These two fathers of the Social Gospel also exemplify the ways in which American industrial capitalism, Anglo-American nationalism, and the Social Gospel movement supported one another (Dorrien 2001).

A minister in Columbus, Ohio, Gladden would eventually come to "epitomize the movement's mainstream" (Dorrien 2010: 13) He condemned equally the exploitation of laborers at the hands of the capitalist wage system and the violence of the labor strikes he had witnessed in the 1860s, culminating in the Haymarket Rebellion of 1886 (Evans 2004). Gladden saw little hope in labor unions, violent or not, and advocated revenue sharing between capitalists and their employees in order to curtail political socialism. The issue was simply one of cooperation replacing wages as wages had replaced slavery and serfdom (Dorrien 2010). This was for Gladden an act of Christian fellowship and a way in which the industrializing country could achieve "social salvation," a term that he created to refer to the achievement of a just and Christian economic order (Evans 2004).

Gladden's message was directed to the upper- and middle-class Protestants who had the economic power to make the industrial economy just (Gladden 1889). His idea of the perfected Christian social order, a "non-socialist, decentralized economic democracy," was intended to head off threats to the established economic order through reform led by individual employers (Dorrien 2010: 9). Gladden insisted that what was needed was the "Christianization of the present order" rather than its replacement by a socialist economy (Dorrien 2001: 308). In an era during which intense socialist activism began calling for state-based reforms, this was hardly a revolutionary stance (Frieden 2006).

Rauschenbusch followed Gladden in both his message and the selection of his audience. The influence of the older minister was evident in the sources on which Rauschenbusch drew to fund a new sanctuary for his congregation. Aside from the sale of the old building and a gift from the Baptist City Mission, he procured about one third of the funds through personal appeals to John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Rauschenbusch shared Gladden's proximity to the upper classes, and the development of both men's theology reinforced their focus on reform of capitalism through the reform of capitalists (Evans 2004).

Accordingly, both Rauschenbusch and Gladden distanced themselves from liberal theologians who advocated for centralized reforms, the most important of whom was George Herron (Eisenach 1994). Though self-educated, Herron rose to the status of minister and professor, and he was the leading figure of the Kingdom Movement of the mid-1890s, which received initial support from Josiah Strong, among other church leaders. This support, however, was short-lived, as Herron's appeals for state regulation and control of property were unattractive to other liberal leaders. The Brotherhood of the Kingdom, the discussion group that was formed by Rauschenbusch and Strong, among others, had no interest in offering Herron membership. The pivotal issues were his perceived hostility to the middle class and his sympathy for socialism (Evans 2004).

Thus most Social Gospellers maintained the traditional evangelical focus on personal salvation, as did the revivalists of their day, such as Billy Sunday. What differentiated them was a change in the conception of what that salvation would mean for the life of the reborn individual. The Social Gospellers believed that this new life must extend, as Gladden put it, to "[e]very department of human life—the families, the schools, amusements, art, business, politics, industry; national politics, international relations" (quoted in Evans 2004: 106). The change in each of these departments, however, would still come primarily through the personal actions of individual Christians within the existing economic and political traditions. While Gladden, Rauschenbusch, and Strong believed that some governmental reforms were certainly needed, they saw no need to shift to a wholly new economic or political model (Dorrien 2010).

The proponents of the Social Gospel could thus, for the most part, hold up the civilization and religion of the United States as the highest and purest in all of human history and, at the same time, call for the reform and perfection of the American religious and social order. They equated the Kingdom of God with democracy and an appropriately reformed capitalism (Dorrien 2001). For Rauschenbusch, two of the marks of a good Church were “Americanism” and “having thoroughly assimilated the principle of democracy” (Evans 2004: 154–155). He believed that “the essence of Christianity was revealed in how it bequeathed a democratic ethos to modern society” (Evans 2004: 200). and wrote in his most important book, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, that in America, “Democracy is a holy word” (quoted in Evans 2004: 200). In short, the Social Gospellers were not economic or political revolutionaries; rather, they were committed to the gradual reform of the status quo.

Furthermore, they believed that this reform was possible only through the actions of the middle- and upper-class descendants of Englishmen, as “many of them embraced the dominant culture’s Anglo-Saxon racial mythology” (Dorrien 2001: 409). They drew particularly on the social evolutionary thought of John Fiske, Darwin’s chosen spokesman in the United States. Fiske made his name on the idea that the United States possessed the precise combination of democracy, religion, and industry needed to “peaceably civilize the world,” and the Social Gospellers accepted modern science’s endorsement of their Americanist theology (Dorrien 2001: 319).

Josiah Strong, the other pastor who exerted an enormous influence on Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel movement as a whole, exemplified this cultural chauvinism. He began his religious career as a pastor in Cincinnati and made his name as the author of *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis*, published in 1885. Strong’s book captured the ethos of the early social gospel, sold 100,000 copies, and was by far his most important work (Evans 2004).

Each of Strong’s first several chapters spelled out one danger that he believed the country faced: intemperance, immigration, “Romanism” (Catholicism), Mormonism, and the “exhaustion of public lands.” The solution to all of these was a reinvigoration of Protestantism, what he called the “Christianization” of the nation.<sup>4</sup> Strong’s concept of “pure spiritual Christianity,” however, was a strictly ethnocultural one. He believed that the cause of the Reformation had been “the fire of liberty burning in the Saxon heart that flamed up against the absolutism of the Pope,” and it was destined that such true Christianity could arise only among a “Teutonic, rather than a Latin, people.” Yet this pure religion had crumbled within its Germanic homeland and persisted only among Strong’s own people, the

---

<sup>4</sup> Strong’s epigraph reads as follows: “We live in a new and exceptional age. America is another word for opportunity. Our whole history appears like a last effort of Providence on behalf of the human race.” He attributes the quote to Emerson.



Anglo-Saxons, upon whom the future of the country, and the world, depended (Strong 1885: 160).

The pivotal and conclusive chapter of *Our Country* was entitled “The Anglo-Saxon and the World’s Future.” In it, Strong articulates his vision of an expansion of the race that would stop only at the edges of the world. The first phase of that expansion, already accomplished, had been the procurement of control over “1/3 of the earth’s surface” (Strong 1885: 162). The second phase, which was underway, was the continued growth of the Anglo-Saxon population. Employing the newly available social science tools of the census and estimated growth rates, Strong used current trends to project growth in the populations of Canada, Australia, Britain, and the United States over the next hundred years, until 1980. The total number of Anglo-Saxons in that year he projected to be 713,000,000, compared to only 480,000,000 for the population of all of continental Europe. For him, the conclusion was inevitable:

It is not unlikely that, before the close of the next century, this race will outnumber all the other civilized races of the world. Does it not look as if God were not only preparing in our Anglo-Saxon civilization the die with which to stamp the peoples of the earth, but as if he were also massing behind that die the mighty power with which to press it? My confidence that *this race is eventually to give its civilization to mankind* is not based on mere numbers—China forbid! I look forward to what the world has never yet seen united in the same race; viz., the greatest numbers, *and* the highest civilization (Strong 1889: 165).<sup>5</sup>

This God-given destiny would not fall to the British, who were eliminated from leadership in the Anglo-Saxon world by the paucity of their native territory. Instead, it would fall to the United States. In fact, Strong approvingly quoted Charles Darwin as having said, “All other series of events—as that which resulted in the culture of mind in Greece, and that which resulted in the Empire of Rome—only appear to have purpose and value when viewed in connection with, or rather as subsidiary to, the great stream of Anglo-Saxon emigration to the West” (Strong 1885: 170). Only one thing could follow this final, historical emigration to the last open and arable part of the globe:

*the final competition of races, for which the Anglo-Saxon is being schooled . . . this race of unequalled energy, with all the majesty of numbers and the might of wealth behind it—the representative, let us hope, of the largest liberty, the purest Christianity, the highest civilization—having developed peculiarly aggressive traits calculated to impress its institutions upon mankind, will spread itself over the earth. If I read not amiss, this powerful race will move down upon Mexico, down upon Central and South America, out upon the islands of the sea, over upon*

---

<sup>5</sup> Italics added.

Africa and beyond. And can any one doubt that the result of this competition of races will be the ‘survival of the fittest’? (Strong 1885: 171).<sup>6</sup>

The full importance of this “final competition” was deeper than mere survival. Quoting another theologian, Horace Bushnell, Strong went on to elaborate on the culmination of history:

It would seem as if these inferior tribes were only precursors of a superior race, voices in the wilderness crying: ‘Prepare ye the way of the Lord!’ . . . in what Dr. Bushnell calls “the out-populating power of the Christian stock,” may be found God’s final and complete solution of the dark problem of heathenism among many inferior peoples (Strong 1885: 177).

For Strong, then, the overspreading of the earth by American Anglo-Saxonism was not merely a historical process with theological importance. It was the method by which God would bring about global peace and the end of history. Gladden preached this message to his congregation and fully endorsed Strong’s “theology of Anglo-Saxonism” (Dorrien 2001: 324).

Strong’s vision, at first glance, appears racist. However, the leading scholars of the Social Gospel have claimed that Strong was “guilty more of cultural chauvinism than [of] overt racism based upon biological superiority” (Evans 2004: 55). Strong spoke, for example, of the “Anglo-Saxonization” of German immigrants to the United States “within a generation,” making it clear that other Europeans, at least, could receive the Anglo-Saxon “impress” (Strong 1885: 173).

More important, Strong constantly framed his case for Anglo-Saxon superiority only secondarily in biological and cultural terms, such as height, chest breadth, weight, life span, aggression, and skill at colonization. His first and final appeal was always to the superiority of the institutions and religion of the Anglo-Saxon people, particularly those Anglo-Saxons who were living in the United States. Biology, culture, politics, and religion were clearly joined in his mind to some degree, but at least the latter three of these he thought could also be spread to people who had not originally been endowed with them. When Strong spoke of the Anglo-Saxon “race” replacing all others in every part of the world, he was referring to the “Anglo-Saxonization” of institutions and culture, not simply the descendants of Englishmen overspreading the entire globe. Thus, the Anglo-Saxon race would “give its civilization to mankind” and “impress its institutions upon mankind,” at times without ruling or displacing foreign peoples (Strong 1885: 165, 171).<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Italics added.

<sup>7</sup> Strong is remembered for his concern with “Christianizing the social order,” which he shared with Gladden and Rauschenbusch. This concern, though, cannot be separated from Strong’s

Rauschenbusch accepted Gladden's and Strong's views on the superiority of American civilization and how to reform its social order (Evans 2004). The younger man's first effort at social programming demonstrated as much. Second German Baptist became one of many churches that provided support to the thousands of young women who established "home missions" and deaconess societies. Their object was to serve, evangelize, and Americanize the Catholic, Orthodox, and Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe and Russia who were then flooding into New York (Strong 1885). Indeed, *Our Country* was an updated and expanded version of a forty-year-old pamphlet issued by the Home Missionary Society to aid its workers in combating the threats posed by foreign blood and beliefs (Dorrien 2001). For Strong, Rauschenbusch, and Gladden, "'Christianization' was a term synonymous with Americanization" (Evans 2004: 57).

The same can be said, to a greater or lesser degree, of almost all the leading figures in the Social Gospel tradition. They believed strongly that although the politics, society, industry, and religion of the United States were in dire need of reform, these still represented the pinnacle of human achievement (Dorrien 2010). Given the cultural triumphalism of the age in which they lived, it would have been surprising if they had not. The conception of an "Anglo-Saxon" identity became popular in the aftermath of the Civil War, and people in the United States widely believed themselves to be the ascending, if still lesser, branch of the world's dominant family (Pettitt 2007).

Such national pride was commonplace during the height of modern imperialism and the decades of the scramble for control of Africa. The French, British, Belgians, Germans, Russians, Americans, and Japanese all sought to bring their own version of civilization, democracy, free trade, economic development, and/or enlightened religion to foreign populations (Hobsbawm 1994). The imperial powers took it to be a self-evident fact that some peoples had advanced far beyond others in all areas of life and could therefore proclaim a duty and a right to help backward peoples.

The Social Gospellers believed that there were "no monsters," no essentially bad people, and that "bad conditions" of low wages and poor living standards played a part in creating what the people who were in power at the time perceived as threats, primarily organized labor. The Social Gospellers also believed that there were essentially threatening ethnic, religious, and national groups; but they

---

cultural chauvinism. Although he was sure that Anglo-American culture would triumph globally, whether the Anglo-Saxonized world would be fully Christian was still undetermined. Strong believed that it was "in the hands of the Christians of the United States, during the next fifteen or twenty years, to hasten or retard the coming of Christ's kingdom in the world by hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of years." (Strong 1885: 180) He echoed Gladden's belief that convincing Christians that an equitable economy, freely chosen by all involved, was the only way to reconcile Christian ideals with industrialization, and he added to this the urgency of a world-historical mission.

held that the individual members of those groups could be Anglo-Saxonized, Americanized, democratized, and Christianized. Indeed, all of these terms of transformation were synonymous in Social Gospel writing and in social programs. Furthermore, the cultural chauvinism of the leading Social Gospel figures was crucial in determining the role that this movement's thinking would play in U.S. foreign policy. At the turn of the twentieth century, that role was certainly not a promotion of nonviolence.

*"A CHRISTIANIZING OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS"*

In a public statement that was published widely in 1918, Walter Rauschenbusch pledged his support for the Allied war effort (Evans 2004). His statement followed a long refusal to condemn Germany and repeated appeals for neutrality on the part of the United States, positions for which he had been denounced. He had previously argued that Germany was merely expanding, as the other European empires had done, and had been made a scapegoat in the United States to justify the righteousness of the Allied cause. He had also spoken out against Western militarism and American arms manufacturers, whom he condemned for pulling the United States deeper into the conflict in order to sell their wares to Europe. These were themes he had spoken of for decades and that were accompanied by constant criticism of the German aristocracy, but by 1914, such statements were enough to earn Rauschenbusch a reputation as a "pro-German divine" (Evans 2004: 286).

Indeed, though Rauschenbusch made common cause with the pacifists such as A. J. Mustie and Norman Thomas, much of his long-standing opposition to the war sprang from sympathy for Germany. He saw that country as much more deeply flawed than the United States, but he had spent several years of his youth there and had studied at German universities as an adult. Perhaps most important, however, was his personal connection to his family origins. As he wrote to a friend in 1916, "[M]y sense of honor recoiled from putting my knife into the land of fathers, where my father and mother are buried" (quoted in Evans 2004: 287).

Rauschenbusch's statement of 1918 maintained this position, though it was overshadowed by the purpose for which he was writing. At the prompting of colleagues who had questioned his allegiances, he set out to prove his American identity and perhaps to protect himself from government attention at a time when prominent socialists, such as Eugene Debs, had been imprisoned under the espionage acts. Rauschenbusch appealed primarily to his credentials as an advocate of the American way: "I am not merely an American in sentiment, but have taken our democratic principles very seriously, and used my life to inculcate and spread them here and abroad" (quoted in Evans 2004: 309).

This statement, written by Rauschenbusch at the height of World War I, "reflected a sentiment consistent through his public career: the need to export to

the world the theoretical and practical models of American democracy” (Evans 2004: 309). Gladden, too, spoke of the need to “make the world safe for democracy” (Dorrien 2010: 13). For the leadership of the Social Gospel tradition as a whole, the program of Americanization abroad was the international equivalent of the home missions. Fittingly, the first impact of the Social Gospel on U.S. foreign policy was a push for the spread of American political and economic institutions, and the first policy initiative to embody this legacy was the Spanish-American War.

William McKinley’s 1896 campaign for the White House was built around expansionism. The platform included plans for American-Canadian unification and an isthmian canal; they also called for the annexation of Hawaii and independence from the Spanish for Cuba (Herring 2008). After two years of negotiations with Spain, demands in the U.S. press for “*Cuba libre*” (“free Cuba”) reached a fever pitch after the explosion of the USS *Maine* in Havana harbor. In April 1898, President McKinley went to Congress asking for the power to make good on his campaign promise.

Instead of declaring war, however, the House and Senate issued a joint resolution stating not only that independence was the right of the Cuban people, but also that it was “the duty of the United States to demand” that independence. The resolution further authorized McKinley to use the full military resources of the United States to ensure that this end would be accomplished. Finally, it declared, “The United States hereby disclaims any disposition or intention to exercise sovereignty, jurisdiction, or control over said Island except for the pacification thereof, and asserts its determination, when that is accomplished, to leave the government and control of the Island to its people.” This fourth provision came to be known as the Teller Amendment, after the Colorado Senator who sponsored it (U.S. Congress 1898).

The war spread immediately to the Pacific and later throughout the Caribbean. Commodore George Dewey was sent to Manila Harbor, where he defeated an aging Spanish fleet. U.S. land forces moved into Puerto Rico only days before peace negotiations began in Paris but in time for the victorious McKinley to demand the island as part of the settlement. In the end, the United States purchased the Philippines, Guam, and the Wake Atoll for \$20 million (Herring 2008).

The Treaty of Paris provoked serious opposition from a diverse and relatively small group of American anti-imperialists. The group included psychologist and philosopher William James, who opposed imperialism outright, and others who objected to bringing any “debased and ignorant” race under U.S. jurisdiction (Herring 2008; McDougall 1997). The voices of the Social Gospel leaders were not, however, among those that opposed the war. Rauschenbusch stated that God had “made clear his will in the irrepressible course of events,” (quoted in Evans 2004: 139), and Washington Gladden was sure that the United States liberated

Cuba and took the Philippines under her wing in an act of “Christian friendship” (Gladden 1916: 65–66). Josiah Strong, whose general views on American expansion were already clear, published a book-length criticism of anti-imperialists (Marty 1970). They were hardly alone among their religious brethren. Protestant journals came out in favor of the war 3 to 1. Indeed, “[r]eligious sentiment was instrumental in rallying the American people” to an imperial mission (McDougall 1997: 112).

The Senate approved the treaty after the supposed leader of the anti-imperialists and actual leader of the Democratic Party, William Jennings Bryan, instructed his followers to vote for the measure in order to end hostilities with Spain. Nevertheless, the debate over what to do with the newly acquired territories continued. For the first time in its history, the United States was hotly engaged in a national debate about what it meant to liberate a foreign people and under what conditions it would shape the new possessions into its own image (Herring 2008).

Interestingly, the positions that were taken in that debate coalesced around the three methods of Anglo-Saxonization to which Strong had alluded in *Our Country*. His race, he believed, was “destined to dispossess many weaker races, assimilate others, and mold the remainder, until, in a very true and important sense, it has Anglo-Saxonized mankind” (Strong 1885: 177). Some pundits and policymakers advocated the displacement of at least the elites among the Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and Filipinos and the incorporation of their lands into the U.S. territory. There was nothing new about such dispossession, which had swept the Anglo-Saxons across the North American continent and had also just been practiced in Hawaii, where European-American sugar barons had overthrown the local monarchy and petitioned for annexation (McDougall 1997).

Strong’s second method of Americanization was assimilation, or incorporation of the people and their lands into the territory of the United States. Assimilation differed from dispossession in that it did not necessarily imply the displacement of locals. Strictly speaking, it implied only the Americanization of the political, educational, and religious institutions of the occupied country and the placement of those institutions under the federal power of the U.S. government. This method of Americanization was extremely unpopular with many people, as it amounted in their eyes to little more than the incorporation of weaker races into the United States (Herring 2008). The issues of immigration and imperialism were joined in their minds, as in those of the Social Gospellers.

Third, Strong had spoken of molding foreign peoples in the religious, political, and cultural image of the United States. The implication was that once this had been accomplished, they would be left to govern themselves. In other words, these people were thought capable of learning from Americans the art of self-government as it was practiced by the United States, and once their apprenticeship

was complete, they would be allowed to practice this art. There were no examples to look to here; no imperial power had previously granted independence to a subject people.<sup>8</sup> The idea of temporary occupation and tutelage in the ways of American democracy was the crucial contribution that the Social Gospel made to U.S. foreign policy thinking.

All three options and combinations of two or more of them were proposed for each of the newly acquired populated territories. Immediately after landing in Cuba, several high military officials declared bluntly that its population was utterly incapable of self-government, placing themselves squarely in favor of some sort of tutelage. At least one Congressman spoke openly of immediate assimilation (Cayton and Anderson 2005), and many people in and outside government assumed that this would occur “naturally” through a process of displacement of locals by Americans, as had occurred in Texas, California, and Hawaii (Herring 2008). Still, the Teller Amendment required that Cuba, at least, be granted formal independence as soon as it was pacified. In an apparent victory for the anti-imperialists, this was done in 1901 (Cayton and Anderson 2005).

Yet the concerns of the occupying military officials were not left unaddressed. The Platt Amendment, while formally declaring Cuba independent, severely curtailed the powers of its new government. Under the amendment’s provisions, the United States would retain the right to intervene in Cuban affairs at its discretion to maintain “a government adequate for the provision of life, property, and individual liberty,” and the United States would be given land and harbor rights at Guantanamo Bay. Cuba was barred from granting any concessions to foreign powers and was limited in its ability to contract debts; both of these were common provisos of imperial intervention throughout the world (Cayton and Anderson 2005). As the U.S. military governor General Leonard Wood stated, “There is, of course, little or no independence left Cuba under the Platt Amendment” (Herring 2008: 325).

Cuba had become a “virtual protectorate” in which the United States retained nearly total power to shape economic and political practices (McDougall 1997). In short, it was questionable whether Cuba had achieved the requisite level of Americanism that was thought necessary for self-government. The third of Strong’s methods of Anglo-Saxonization, the molding of a foreign population through intervention, was a constant possibility. U.S. citizens had purchased the vast majority of the Cuban sugar estates, tying the island tightly to the economy of the continental United States and providing a further reason for continued U.S. oversight (Herring 2008).

Although the Teller Amendment and local desire for independence prevented the assimilation of Cuba, Puerto Rico was quickly and permanently annexed as

---

<sup>8</sup> The first to do this would be Woodrow Wilson.

“incorporated territory,” a newly invented legal status that provided for indefinite U.S. rule with or without the consent of the governed. The U.S. Supreme Court approved the legal validity of this status in the Insular Cases, which also applied to Guam, the Mariana Islands, and the Wake Atoll.<sup>9</sup> Missionaries had expressed particular interest in Christianizing Puerto Rico even before it had been invaded, and many of its inhabitants demonstrated to the United States willingness to accept its tutelage, making legal assimilation an obvious choice (Herring 2008).

The status of the Philippines proved more difficult to settle. McKinley, at least, had said from the beginning that “the mission of the United States is one of benevolent assimilation” (Herring 2008: 328). In 1899, he received a visiting delegation of the Episcopal Methodist Church, whom he encouraged in their petition for the right to proselytize in the Philippines. The President went on to declare that after a night of prayer, God had made it clear to him that the Americans were “to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God’s grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellow-men for whom Christ also died” (McDougall 1997: 112).<sup>10</sup> General Arthur MacArthur, commander of U.S. forces in the Philippines, declared the islands “a fertile soil upon which to plant republicanism . . . and the best characteristics of Americanism” (Cayton and Anderson 2005: 338).

President McKinley and General MacArthur sought to accomplish this mission of Christianization and Americanization in the face of an insurgency that began after the Spanish had been gone from the Philippines for over nine months. On February 4, 1899, a firefight broke out along the U.S.-Filipino lines. Twenty-four hours later, 3,000 Filipinos and fifty-nine Americans were dead, and the Philippine-American War was in full swing (Cayton and Anderson 2005). Yet for McKinley, it was part and parcel of the process of Americanization; in time, the Filipinos “would come to see our benevolent purpose and recognize that before we can give their people good government our sovereignty must be complete and unquestioned” (Cayton and Anderson 2005: 334).

The United States declared a military government without any promise of future independence. Vice President Theodore Roosevelt began to refer to the Philippine-American War as a war between “civilization” and “the black chaos of savagery and barbarism” and declared that to “[w]ithdraw from the contest for civilization because of the fact that there are attendant cruelties is . . . utterly unworthy of a great people” (Williams 1980: 826). The insurgency was largely

---

<sup>9</sup> Generally intended to advance U.S. hegemony over the Pacific and Caribbean in preparation for the defense of a Central American canal, possession of these territories was more narrowly aimed at providing linkages, as coaling or cable stations, between the coasts of the United States and the Philippines. See Herring 2008

<sup>10</sup> See also “McKinley’s Disputed Quote: ‘uplift and civilize and Christianize them,’” available at <http://myths-americana.livejournal.com/22002.html>.



broken by March 1901, though fighting continued for years. On July 4, 1902, Roosevelt, who had become president after the assassination of McKinley, confirmed U.S. rule over the Philippines, and the war ended. With atrocities reported on both sides, it had led to over 200,000 Filipino casualties, left 5,000 Americans dead from disease and combat, and cost the United States \$400 million—the equivalent of \$30 billion today (Herring 2008). The question of assimilation or tutelage for independence would not be answered until 1916, by a president who embodied the Social Gospel like no other.

The relationship between early liberal Christianity and the Spanish-American War was then, at the least, sympathetic. Most of the major figures in the Social Gospel movement offered public support for a war that was fought in the name of Americanization and Christianization. The president who began the war professed as much in front of a religious audience from his own denomination. Most important, the eventual relationship between the United States and each of the territories that were gained in the process of that war reflected what Josiah Strong would call “Anglo-Saxonization.” Liberal Christianity made a concrete contribution to the administrative and legal forms that were taken by a “self-consciously progressive imperialism born of Americans’ sense of secular and religious mission” at the turn of the century (McDougall 1997: 114). Moreover, the Social Gospel provided a religious and moral case for intervention; in no way did it promote nonviolence.

This is not to say that the Social Gospel leadership or its theology directly caused the invasions of Cuba and the Philippines. Historians have proposed a long list of contributing factors to explain the war. Some of the most notable are the commonly cited “yellow” journalism, a perceived need to cultivate the martial virtues in the U.S. population, a demand for foreign markets, and a militarism born of the desire to flex the nation’s new industrial might (Cayton and Anderson 2005; Herring 2008; McDougall 1997).<sup>11</sup> However, what drove the United States to expand its territory is somewhat beside the point. What is salient here is that Social Gospel leaders supported the war and its goals as articulated by political and military leaders—McKinley and MacArthur, for example—in language that echoed the language of the Social Gospel itself.

This language, of course, also echoed that of the spokesmen of the broader Progressive movement, who sought empire but did not express their goals in religious terms. Again, this is somewhat unimportant to the issue of where the Social Gospel stood relative to international relations. Liberal Christianity was a critical part the Progressive movement as a whole. It shared that movement’s goals and worked with Progressivism to accomplish those goals, particularly in the realm of foreign affairs. Indeed, it could be argued, on the basis of a wider survey of imperialist rhetoric than has been undertaken here, that religious

---

<sup>11</sup> These overview texts are mere starting points in an investigation of the causes of the war.

Progressives who followed the Social Gospel helped to form the vanguard of the imperialist movement. McKinley, though careful to use secular language in his public addresses, was a pious man with close ties to the Methodist Church, who eventually spoke of divine inspiration for his occupation of the Philippines. Furthermore, the arch-imperialist of the day, Senator Albert J. Beveridge, asked, in support of McKinley's campaign for reelection in 1900: "Have we no mission to perform, no duty to discharge to our fellowman? Has the Almighty Father . . . marked us as the people of his peculiar favor merely to rot in our own selfishness, as men must who take cowardice for their companion and self for their Deity?" (quoted in McDougall 1997: 101).

Again, such a claim goes beyond what can be shown here. All that should be noted for the moment is that the Social Gospel was in the thick of the progressive imperial project of remaking foreign nations. At a time when the dominant majority of the U.S. populace believed in the absolute superiority of American political practices, values, and religion, what set the Progressives apart was their belief that "Americanism" could be spread to immigrants of any race, religion, or nationality. What further set the Social Gospellers apart from other Progressives was their belief that it was the duty of Christians to ensure that Americanism was so propagated, both at home and abroad. Liberal Christians, including the politicians who spoke their language, declared that Christian love should infuse relations between nations, just as it should "Christianize" the relations between economic classes. This "christianizing of international relations," as Rauschenbusch (1918: 311) had described it, first found expression in the invasions of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines and had the most immediate impact of the Social Gospel on U.S. foreign policy.

The project of Americanization continued and expanded after the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars. In the Philippines, Governor General William Howard Taft declared, "We are doing God's work" by replicating American institutions among the Filipinos (Cayton and Anderson 2005: 345). Presidents Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson initiated nation-building projects when they sent troops into the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Mexico (McDougall 1997). The object in each case was to foster stability and limit indebtedness through the inculcation of "American ideas, institutions, and values," though these initiatives were met with intense local opposition (Herring 2008).<sup>12</sup>

### *THE CIVILIZING MISSION AND THE WAR FOR PEACE*

During the same decade in which the United States began regularly deploying its armed forces outside North America, a peace movement began exerting real

---

<sup>12</sup> Not all of the U.S. missions abroad were met so harshly; the people of Italy and Japan warmly welcomed naval vessels that were sent to offer them earthquake relief.

influence on the country's international relations. President Roosevelt embodied both the new militarism and the burgeoning pacifism. He declared it the right of the United States to intervene throughout the Western Hemisphere in order to promote stability through the inculcation of Americanism and to administer the debts of foreign countries. Both were methods of removing all excuses for intervention by European powers. Simultaneously, he facilitated the negotiations between Japan and Russia after their war in 1905, and he received the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts (Herring 2008).

A combination of two beliefs resolved the apparent contradictions between militarism and pacifism in the person of Roosevelt and remained a point of agreement between the advocates of each. The first belief was that the world is divided into the civilized and the uncivilized. In Roosevelt's mind, peace between the members of the former group, such as Russia and Japan, was in no way opposed in Roosevelt's mind to intervention by these countries in the affairs of their inferiors. Where the "barbaric" peoples' misconduct necessitated it, he said, the "[w]arlike intervention by the civilized powers would contribute directly to the peace of the world" (quoted in Herring 2008: 347). John Fiske, the evolutionist who was followed by many Social Gospellers, stated flatly that war would continue until the "barbarous races" were all subdued, since for them, war was "both a necessity and a favorite occupation" (Dorrien 2001: 319). The concept of absolute global peace thus became compatible with armed intervention, especially in the affairs of the less civilized countries and regions. No contradiction was seen to exist between working for peace and the buildup and deployment of military strength in the developing world. The second belief was in the superiority of the institutions of the United States to all others, in other words, the belief that no country or region was as civilized as the United States. Roosevelt hailed the advance of Americanism as the key to peace, a sentiment that was shared by many people in the U.S. peace movement. Specifically, both the President and his supporters sought the installation of American institutions throughout the world. The advancement of Americanism, whether by military or diplomatic means, was for pacifists of the day synonymous with their ultimate goal of world peace. After that goal had been attained, according to the 1923 charter of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the organization could move on to "the next most degrading remaining evil or evils" (quoted in Herring 2008: 357).

Woodrow Wilson shared Roosevelt's vision of a world split between the civilized and uncivilized in which the United States played the role of moral guide. He had supported the invasion of the Philippines (Wilson 1902), and he repeatedly expressed his belief that the United States had a duty to "educate other

peoples in self-government” (Wilson 1972 [1900]: 17–18).<sup>13</sup> Wilson’s vision, however, was infused with a strong religiosity, as was that of the Social Gospelers. In a 1911 speech entitled “The Bible and Progress,” Wilson declared that no man should “suppose that progress can be divorced from religion . . . the man whose faith is rooted in the Bible knows that reform cannot be stayed” (quoted in McDougall 1997: 128).

Once Wilson was in the White House, his foreign policy embodied his belief that the United States had a duty to tutor lesser peoples toward independence. In 1913, a sympathetic confidante told him that in Latin America, “We are providentially, naturally, and inescapably, charged with maintenance of humanity’s interests.” Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan believed that the rest of the hemisphere, aside from Canada, was inhabited by “our political children” (quoted in Herring 2008: 386). Accordingly, the Wilson administration intensified the campaign of foreign interventionism that its predecessors had begun. Aside from increasing the military presence in Nicaragua enough to render it a protectorate, the President deployed troops once to Cuba, twice to Panama, and no fewer than five times to Honduras. By 1915, he had ordered the occupation of the whole of Hispaniola and sent troops into Mexico in 1914 and 1916. In each case, Wilson sought to teach “the South Americans to elect good men” and to provide for stability at a time when German influence in the region was perceived as an imminent threat (Cayton and Anderson 2005; McDougall 1997). Seeking self-government for “lesser peoples” only after they have been properly occupied and tutored by the civilized must be recognized as part of Wilson’s legacy and the legacy of social Christianity in the United States (Desch 2009).

As Europe descended into war, Wilson came to believe that the goals of global Americanization and the achievement of absolute peace required intervention in the affairs of a continent that had demonstrated its inferiority to the United States by tearing itself apart. Wilson believed firmly that European political practices had led directly to the bloody stalemate of trench warfare that could consume a hundred thousand lives in a day. Old World diplomacy, the balance of power, imperial rivalry, and economic nationalism had produced the conditions in which world war was possible and perhaps inevitable. Wilson intended to correct these flaws in Europe’s political institutions by the internationalization of American diplomatic, governmental, and economic practices (Wilson 1918).

Wilson hoped the Great War would culminate in what he called “peace without victory,” an end to the conflict through negotiations led by a neutral United States. He expressed his concern that joining the Allies would mean “that we

---

<sup>13</sup> Wilson would have the opportunity to put that sentiment into action after he attained the Presidency. The Jones Act, which was passed while he occupied the White House, committed the United States to eventual Filipino independence. It was the first time that any imperial power had promised a colony even autonomy, much less full self-government (see Herring 2008).

should lose our heads along with the rest and stop weighing right and wrong . . . at the end of the war there will be no bystanders with sufficient peace standards left to work with. There will be only war standards.”<sup>14</sup> Wilson saw the neutrality of the United States as a divinely granted opportunity to advance the cause of a peaceful world order based on American practices and institutions. As he wrote to Colonel Edward M. House, his Secretary of State, “Providence has deeper plans than we could possibly have laid ourselves” (Wilson 1979 [1914]: 336). House agreed that the United States could no longer refuse to play “[t]he Great part in the world which was providentially cut out for her. . . . We have got to serve the World” (Wilson 1982 [1916]: 338).

This intended neutrality broke down in the face of a variety of tensions and events, including the need to continue trade with Europe, especially the Allies; the sinking of the *Lusitania*; the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare by Germany; and, finally, the publication of the Zimmerman telegram, in which Germany proposed a German-Mexican alliance against the United States (Cayton and Anderson 2005; Herring 2008; McDougall 1997). Wilson’s own reservations about using intervention to create a peaceful world did not dissolve until after the Bolsheviks in Russia disrupted his ability to influence Europe in November 1917. Only then did he finally succumb, as he feared, to “war standards” and declare, “Force, Force to utmost, . . . the righteous and triumphant force which shall make Right the law of the world” (quoted in Ahlstrom 1972: 890).

The vast majority of churches of nearly every denomination or theological preference stood squarely behind Wilson in words and deeds (Ahlstrom 1972; Dorrien 2010). In pulpits across the land, the Germans were described as barbarians and the Kaiser as the brother of the devil in hell. In front of a congregation of thousands at Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, New York, Newell Dwight Harris advocated “the sterilization of 10,000,000 German soldiers” (quoted in Ahlstrom 1972: 885). One pastor preached that Christ himself “would take bayonet and grenade and bomb and rifle and do the work of deadlines against that which is the most deadly enemy of his Father’s Kingdom in a thousand years” (quoted in Ahlstrom 1972: 885).

The Social Gospel leadership, too, stood squarely in the militarist camp (Abrams 1933). Shailer Mathews, a Social Gospel scholar from the University of Chicago Divinity School and a close intellectual companion of Rauschenbusch, asserted, “For an American to refuse to share in the present war . . . is not Christian” (Evans 2004: 151). The Federal Council of Churches declared, “The war for righteousness will be won! Let the Church do its part” (Ahlstrom 1972: 886).

Yet the Social Gospellers did not seek a punitive peace; instead, they formed the religious vanguard of those who saw the war as a way to establish world peace

---

<sup>14</sup> From Wilson’s conversation with Frank Cobb of the *New York World*, as reported by Maxwell Anderson (quoted in Ahlstrom 1972: 882).

through U.S. leadership. Three Social Gospel leaders—Washington Gladden, Shailer Mathews, and George Herron—had been among the first to promote the idea of world peace through an international organization established by a victorious United States (Evans 2004; Herron 1917). Mathews (1918) had gone so far as to suggest that it should be referred to as “a League of Nations.” In the minds and hearts of Social Gospellers, the war and its aftermath had taken on a world-historical importance: They would bring about the end of war itself.

Rauschenbusch, alone among the Social Gospel leadership, thought these ideas complete folly. In 1915, responding to a critic, he said, “You offer a Utopian scheme as a justification for emasculating and hog-tying one of the great parts of humanity. . . . I am afraid of those who want to drag our country in to satisfy their partisan hate, or because they think universal peace will result from the victory of the allies” (Rauschenbusch 1915). He advocated instead, as had Wilson before the Bolshevik uprising, for political and economic neutrality, which would enable the United States to serve as a moral example and counselor to a continent that was ensnared in the wages of its social sins. As was noted above, Rauschenbusch’s sympathy for Germany also played a part in his protests.

In 1917, after the United States entered the war, George Herron published *Woodrow Wilson and the World’s Peace* in response to Wilson’s speech before the Senate in January of the same year. Herron praised the President for having “undertaken to assemble the nations unto the Sermon on the Mount . . . Woodrow Wilson has dared to believe divinely . . . the rostrum of the American Senate had become as God’s burning altar, when, the address of the President concluded, the reverent wonder of the hour went abroad” (Herron 1917: 4, 10). Wilson in turn praised the minister for his “singular insight . . . into my own motives and purposes” (McDougall 1997: 123). Separately, Wilson assured Gladden in a personal letter that he would conduct the war, and build the peace, in line with the ideals that they shared (Dorrien 2010). The President began to speak of a postwar “concert of free peoples as shall . . . make the world itself at last free” and to call for a “covenant” establishing an international organization that could ensure that this would be the last war (Wilson 1917a). He made clear that the United States alone could lead this organization and that, through it, “American principles, American policies” would “become the doctrine of the world” (Wilson 1917b).

The Social Gospellers, including Wilson, intended to bring about world peace through the spread of Americanism; the League of Nations embodied this intention. The President and his religious supporters shared a belief in the absolute superiority of U.S. political practices, values, and principles. They believed, too, that spreading these to the benighted, uncivilized world was the divinely appointed duty of a good American Protestant. In 1917, they saw military force as an acceptable means by which to “put the world in order” and make real their deepest religious hope: a perfect human society, the Kingdom of God on earth.

*A SOCIAL GOSPEL FOR THE NATIONS*

The staff that accompanied Wilson to Versailles reflected the influence that the Social Gospel had on his vision for the postwar world. To many of the top diplomats of the day, the Peace Commission appeared an undistinguished group. Taft called them “a bunch of cheapskates,” and Colonel House left the group during the negotiations in protest. Nor did the membership of this delegation, which included not one leading Republican, reflect an intention to secure bipartisan support for the treaty, whatever that document was to say (Herring 2008).

Wilson did, however, bring people who sympathized with him on a religious level. John R. Mott, the head of foreign expansion for the Young Men’s Christian Association, and George C. Herron, the Social Gospel leader who had so well understood the President’s motives in calling for the League in the first place, joined the President in France. Wilson selected the journalist Ray Stannard Baker, a follower and confidant of Rauschenbusch before the war, to serve as the director of the U.S. press bureau (Evans 2004).<sup>15</sup> Baker asked, during the course of the negotiations, “Is there no Social Gospel for the nations?” The answer was, in Wilson’s mind and the minds of most Social Gospellers, completely clear (Cayton and Anderson 2005).

Despite frustrations and setbacks for the U.S. delegation, the specific provisions of the Treaty of Versailles embodied Wilson’s vision of peace between powers and tutelage for lesser peoples. The breakup of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires proceeded under the mandate system, with the promise of eventual independence for all those in the affected territories. Japan, already angered by a European and U.S. rejection of a clause calling for racial equality, threatened to leave the talks unless its beachhead in China was recognized. The Western European powers accepted the occupation but obtained a Japanese promise of Chinese independence by 1922. The League of Nations and its collective security agreement made it through the negotiations largely intact. The only major provision that contradicted the Social Gospel’s vision for world politics was the demand for massive German reparations, which ensured a punitive peace rather than a purely constructive one (Herring 2008). A perpetually peaceful and free globe, made up of self-governing nations and led by the United States, remained attainable in the eyes of many people.

The address that the President delivered as he presented the treaty to the Senate made it clear that he still considered both the war and the treaty to be holy. Speaking of the U.S. troops who had fought, Wilson said:

---

<sup>15</sup> Baker would later edit Wilson’s personal papers and write a definitive biography of Wilson in eight volumes, the last two of which won a Pulitzer Prize.

They carried the great ideals of a free people at their hearts and with that vision were unconquerable. . . . They were recognized as crusaders, and as their thousands swelled to millions their strength was seen to mean salvation. . . . They were for all the visible embodiment of America. What they did made America and all that she stood for a living reality (Wilson 1919).

Having equated the United States, the war, and the holy cause of freedom, Wilson stated that this salvation had been not only for France, but also for the former citizens of the Ottoman Empire: “Undeveloped peoples and peoples ready for recognition but not yet ready to assume the full responsibilities of statehood were to be given adequate guarantees of friendly protection, guidance, and assistance” (Wilson 1919). The mission of the United States had been one of liberation and tutelage, just as it had been in the Philippines and throughout Latin America over the past twenty years. In closing, Wilson declared:

The stage is set, the destiny disclosed. It has come about by no plan of our conceiving, but by the hand of God who led us into this way. We cannot turn back. We can only go forward, with lifted eyes and freshened spirit, to follow the vision. It was of this that we dreamed at our birth. America shall in truth show the way. The light streams upon the path ahead, and nowhere else (Wilson 1919).

President Wilson believed in a world that could be made perfect only if led by, and remade in the image of, the United States and “all that she stood for.” This purpose not only justified but also sanctified the use of force.

The Congressional battle over ratification of the Treaty of Versailles remains legendary. The story is usually told in terms of isolationists versus internationalists, but this dichotomy does not accurately capture the terms of the wrangling. In fact, an overwhelming majority of senators stood ready to approve some sort of League. However, agreement on the issue of unconditional collective security guarantees, which Wilson perceived as the linchpin that would ensure world peace, proved impossible (Ahlstrom 1972; Herring 2008; McDougall 1997).

There has been and will be endless speculation about Wilson’s reasons for refusing to accept a League of Nations without collective security, which would still have allowed for the establishment of a “new diplomatic tradition” to take the place of balance-of-power diplomacy. A psychological explanation, for example, points to childhood dyslexia leading to extreme idiosyncrasy (Magee 2008). Political explanations often see *realpolitik* behind Wilson’s virtuous rhetoric (Hoff 2008). Given the religious vision of the League that Wilson held, however, it is worth suggesting that his faith contributed to his insistence on the collective security agreement. At least one leading historian, Walter McDougall, has said that what drove Wilson to break his health in the effort to secure ratification of the Treaty of Versailles was the force of his religiosity and the motivating power of



the Social Gospel. As McDougall (1997: 128) points out, “The doctrine of ineluctable progress, applied to the whole human race with the United States in the vanguard, was conventional wisdom in mainstream Protestantism and peaked in the Social Gospel of Wilson’s time.” Indeed, “nearly every ethical and religious justification for American entry into Europe’s war rested on the expected advent of a new era of world order, democracy, and peace. Almost every personal statement and official church pronouncement advancing the cause of war had anchored the argument in some plan for an international agency to outlaw war.” (Ahlstrom 1972: 892–893). For Wilson and most liberal Christians in the United States, U.S. participation in the collective security agreement took on supreme world-historical and personal religious importance. These men and women had supported a war to end all wars and had pinned their religious hopes on its outcome. At least in part, Wilson’s refusal to compromise on the crucial issue of collective security reflected a refusal to compromise this religious conviction.

Whether or not belief in the Social Gospel’s vision of the U.S. role in world history provided the primary reason for why Wilson refused to budge on the issue of collective security, connections existed between his foreign policy and Social Gospel theologians. Wilson’s Latin American project of intervention and tutelage in the ways of democracy echoed the thought of Josiah Strong. Liberal interventionism received the support of Washington Gladden, as well as that of Rauschenbusch until the Wilson administration sought support for war with Germany. Theologian Shailer Mathews propagated the idea for a “League of Nations” before Wilson took it up as policy, and the President negotiated for the League’s creation alongside Herron and Baker. The Social Gospel shaped U.S. foreign policy under Wilson, just as it had under McKinley, by providing each of them reason to fight for the spread of American institutions.

#### *NIEBUHR'S CONTINUATION OF SOCIAL CHRISTIANITY*

After the horrors of trench warfare and the disintegration of the promise of Treaty of Versailles in the face of renewed European quarreling and imperial rivalry, many people in the United States regretted having endorsed Wilson’s crusade. This was especially true of the Social Gospel leaders, who came to believe that the nature of capitalism had made the conflict inevitable (Ahlstrom 1972). Many, like Norman Thomas (1951), began to identify themselves as socialists, and most renounced violence completely (Noble 1985). Rauschenbusch died in 1918, leaving the movement with its manifesto in *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. By that time, the war had turned him into something of a pessimist with regard to the possibility of human perfection. He remained committed, though, to what he referred to as the “radical core of the Social Gospel,” the principle that “the

Kingdom of God is always but coming. But every approximation to it is worthwhile” (Dorrien 2007: 29).<sup>16</sup>

Reinhold Niebuhr stood among the liberal Christians who had supported the war and then renounced violence after it had proven its incompatibility with the final peace of the world. Over the next twenty years, he came to share Rauschenbusch’s qualified pessimism regarding the perfectibility of society. The son of a German immigrant pastor, Niebuhr attended Yale, where his main influences were professors who were “spokesmen for the Social Gospel” (Noble 1985: 68). Similarly, Wilson had been “the inspirer of his earliest views on world affairs” (Merkley 1975: 183). After graduating in 1914, Niebuhr initially denounced the militarism of the day, but he eventually “accepted war” when it came in 1917 (Noble 1985: 69). He separated himself from the German-Americans who romanticized the forces in their homeland, perhaps to avoid the sort of public condemnation that Rauschenbusch’s opposition to the war effort had provoked. Niebuhr also believed that if the war was to come, it was truly better that the Allies win it (Reinhold Niebuhr 1956).

The impact of the peace movement crested with the approval of the Kellogg-Briand Peace pact in 1928 (Herring 2008); this moment also marked the peak of Niebuhr’s standing in the increasingly pacifist liberal Protestant community. He accepted a professorship at Union Theological Seminary in New York, the flagship institution of liberal Protestantism, joining the ranks of the leading liberal theologians. He promoted his ideology through his articles and editorship of a liberal journal, *The Christian Century* (Noble 1985). He also assumed leadership of the most important organization for Social Gospel advocacy, the Fellowship of Reconciliation (Reinhold Niebuhr 1957).

Yet by this time, Niebuhr had begun to voice his doubt that middle-class Protestants, on whom the Social Gospel had pinned its hopes for reform, could transcend their class interests. Convinced by his reading of Max Weber that Protestantism had a deep affinity with capitalism, Niebuhr turned toward Marxism and a hope that the proletariat could create the Kingdom of God on earth. Along with this sympathy for class conflict came an increasingly militant vision of social change (Dibble 1977; Merkley 1975). Niebuhr’s changing viewpoint ruptured his affiliation with the Social Gospel pacifists. When Joseph B. Matthews, a communist, was voted out of a high-level position in the Fellowship of Reconciliation because he advocated violence in service of class struggle, Niebuhr resigned from the organization (Lilje 2010).

Niebuhr was not alone in his calls for a violent overthrow of the economic order. As the Great Depression deepened in 1931, many peace activists moved

---

<sup>16</sup> The similarity in the names of Rauschenbusch’s masterwork and the journal that embodied Reinhold Niebuhr’s movement in the liberal tradition (*Christianity in Crisis*) is perhaps meaningful.

away from strict pacifism toward the idea of class warfare. Niebuhr went beyond class warfare to argue that peace was impossible in international relations as well (Lilje 2010). The issue of pacifism as a point of U.S. foreign policy “brought Niebuhrians into [the] most direct conflict with their sometime-partners in liberal Protestantism” (Marty 1970: 241).

Niebuhr’s rejection of pacifism was based on the neo-orthodox theological principle of “the infinite distinction between time and eternity” (Barth 1933: 10). The implication for social action was simple and direct. As Niebuhr stated in his explanation for leaving the Fellowship of Reconciliation,

If anyone should suggest that those of us who have thus renounced the pacifist position ought not any longer to regard ourselves as Christian, I would answer that it is only a Christianity that suffers from modern liberal illusions that has ever believed that the law of love could be made an absolute guide of conduct in social morality and politics (Reinhold Niebuhr 1957b: 258).

For Niebuhr, it followed that no human organization, whether labor union or sovereign state, could be expected to act altruistically. The Social Gospel vision of a “Christianized” economic and political order therefore proposed an impossible ideal. As he stated bluntly, Niebuhr believed that “the ethic of Jesus . . . transcends the possibilities of human life . . . as God transcends the world” (quoted in Ahlstrom 1972: 942).

Niebuhr self-consciously defined his neo-orthodox theology against the “liberal illusions” of his youth, especially the belief that the world order could be perfected. However, he did not see the impossibility of embodying Christian love in social forms as a reason to disengage from social concerns. While he protested the identification of the Kingdom of God with any possible economic or political configuration, he also believed in a church could be separate from the corrupt world yet minister to it (Reinhold Niebuhr 1938). This “church against the world” was in turn made up of “moral men” who could engage with “immoral society” (Reinhold Niebuhr 1934) and influence its paths in a limited way (Thompson 2007). Although this theology rejected any and all social utopias, Niebuhrian neo-orthodoxy remained hopeful that Christianity could have a positive influence on world affairs (Ahlstrom 1972; Marty 1970). Niebuhr thus remained committed to pressing the essential relationship between Christianity and social responsibility (Dorrien 2010), the central innovation of the Social Gospel generation of theologians (Gorrell 1988).

Indeed, many American neo-orthodox theologians shared Niebuhr’s upbringing in the Social Gospel. These “sons of social gospel leaders, appropriating more than they knew from the progressivism of their fathers,” (Ahlstrom 1972: 948), set out not to end the political, social, and economic project of liberal Christianity, but to reframe Christian social activism within a theology that was more in sync

with the economic and political crises of their time (Ahlstrom 1972; Marty 1970). Their primary revision concerned the extent to which each theologian believed that the project of shaping a peaceful globe could be brought to completion, not the degree to which they believed the world, or the United States, was indeed perfect. Early Social Gospellers had seen a future state of Christianized social perfection, first within the United States and then worldwide, as possible or even inevitable. Neo-orthodox thinkers, especially Niebuhr, insisted that the United States could never achieve social perfection because of humanity's essential flaws (Thompson 2007). The two schools of thought differed primarily over the possibility of perfection, not its present attainment, and both could agree on the need for continued Christian engagement with the social order. Niebuhrian neo-orthodoxy thus carried on and revitalized the dreams of the Social Gospel and liberal Protestantism (Ahlstrom 1972; Dorrien 2003).<sup>17</sup>

#### *NIEBUHRIAN AMERICANISM AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR*

The continuity between Niebuhr and early social Christianity can be seen perhaps most clearly in terms of the theologian's later foreign policy activism. The advance of imperial Japan into China in the early 1930s provoked a series of articles in *The Christian Century*, among them a debate between Reinhold and his brother, H. Richard Niebuhr, on the issue of whether the United States should intervene in Asia. Richard was also a crucial figure of the developing neo-orthodoxy (Ahlstrom 1972). As such, he believed firmly that no human group could construct an order that embodies the Christian ethic, either internally or internationally. Yet he also held, in opposition to Reinhold, that history moves by its nature in the direction of the Kingdom of God (H. Richard Niebuhr 1932a). A Christian country could foster this process only by "eliminating weeds," peacefully recognizing and removing its interests and ways of life that fostered aggression at home or abroad, rather than using force to fight evil or bring about utopia. In any case, Richard argued, the sins of the United States did not differ significantly from those of Japan and had indeed contributed to them. The United States, in his mind, had no moral standing to condemn the Japanese (H. Richard Niebuhr 1932b).

---

<sup>17</sup> However, it can be argued that the pacifist Social Gospellers and Niebuhr should both be seen as legitimate heirs of the liberal Christianity that had driven Wilson's quest for world peace through the war and then had been discredited by its failure. Those who kept the name of "liberal" chose to retain the goal of peace and to sacrifice the idea that violence could bring it about. Niebuhr, on the other hand, reemphasized his belief in the need for intervention on behalf of the oppressed if any decent world order was to be maintained, and he ceded his hope for peace. What must be recognized is that both Niebuhr and his opponents gave up one key element of the early Social Gospel to retain another.

Reinhold responded by first agreeing that “every social sin is, at least partially, the fruit and consequence of the sins of those who condemn it” (Reinhold Niebuhr 1932). Yet if action requires purity and innocence, “we will never be able to act. There will never be a wholly disinterested nation.” Nor, according to the Marxism that he still espoused, could the interests of the underprivileged be advanced without coercion. In the case at hand, the underprivileged were the Chinese, and Reinhold argued that the United States, though flawed, “must try to dissuade Japan from her military venture, but must use coercion to frustrate her designs if necessary” (Reinhold Niebuhr 1932). Thus by the time Germany elected Hitler as its Chancellor in 1933, Reinhold Niebuhr had begun to imply that the United States or another democracy, despite the nation’s flaws, could potentially play a special role in history as a great power that could intervene on the behalf of weaker nations.

Niebuhr grasped the depth of the crisis in Europe more accurately and therefore with greater horror than many other American socialists did. In the aftermath of World War I and the Depression, both of which were (and are still) widely perceived to have been the result of liberal politics, democratic countries constituted a small minority in Europe. Of the thirty-three European states in 1935, only Britain, Denmark, the Netherlands, and France still adhered to a liberal political system. Fascism and communism had arisen as the political and economic forms of the future (Mazower 2000). The apparent acquiescence of the Marxists and socialists to Hitler’s advance thus demonstrated to Niebuhr that the dreams of the Left were mere illusions, leaving those of the tyrannical Right as the only way forward for the European continent.

It is in this context of a duel to the death between the Right and the Left that Niebuhr’s long support for Marxism and his eventual turn to liberal democracy must be understood. Over the course of the 1930s, the demise of political liberalism in Europe reinforced his new appreciation for the virtues of a “provisional justice” fostered by power politics, capitalism, and democracy (Noble 1985). The Italian invasion of Ethiopia gave Niebuhr and many others occasion to denounce the ineffectiveness of the League of Nations and, with it, the Social Gospel pacifists who had long supported the League as an instrument of international peace (Reinhold Niebuhr 1957c). Hitler’s brutal demolition of the German Left, supported by the working classes, gave Niebuhr reason to question the “realism” of Marxism’s belief in class consciousness. The failure of the British Socialists to oppose the Nazi advance only reinforced his skepticism about labor’s ability to effectively oppose the extreme Right (Merkley 1975). He began to celebrate the relative virtue of American-style religion, democracy, and capitalism and to speak of the need to defend them against the onslaught of tyrannical fascism. By the end of the 1930s, Niebuhr was leading American Protestantism away from socialism and pacifism and into the Second World War (Dorrien 2004).

In 1940, Reinhold Niebuhr left the Socialist Party in protest against its advocacy for American nonintervention in the war, and he voted for Franklin D. Roosevelt for the first time, in support of the President's campaign for an unprecedented third term. Niebuhr began almost immediately to affect the debate over intervention via testimony in support of aid to the Allies, which he gave before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as it reviewed the Lend-Lease Act. By the spring of 1941, he was advising the State Department on the situation in Germany (Merkley 1975). He had also founded a weekly journal, *Christianity and Crisis*, to compete with the noninterventionist *Christian Century* (Lilje 2010). A piece in the new journal summarized the changes in his thinking: "We believe that the task of defending the rich inheritance of our civilization to be an imperative one, however much we might desire that our social system were more worthy of defense" (Reinhold Niebuhr 1941a: 4). This social system of democratic capitalism, though flawed, was "slowly but surely responding to the demands of the Christian ethic" (Reinhold Niebuhr 1941b: 2). By the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Niebuhr was ready to articulate a theology for U.S. entry into the war, based on opposition to evil but also on the virtues of a slowly Christianizing democratic capitalism.

That Niebuhr did this in opposition to those who claimed the Social Gospel legacy at the time does not change the fact that he effectively revitalized liberal Protestant theology as well as its vision of the United States and its role in international politics and world history (Dorrien 2007). As an Allied victory became visible, Niebuhr turned his attention to what would come after the war. To him, as to the theologians of the previous generation, only the Anglo-American political institutions provided a model of democratic government that could aid in the reconstruction of world order after the war (Merkley 1975). The title of a piece that Niebuhr published in 1943, "Anglo-Saxon Destiny and Responsibility," echoed the roots of his vision in the Social Gospel.

Consciously or unconsciously, Niebuhr mirrored the rhetoric and message of Josiah Strong's "The Anglo-Saxon and the World's Future," written half a century earlier. Niebuhr, however, qualified the Anglo-Saxon mission, demonstrating the crucial lessons that the past fifty years had taught him. First, he admitted that no "Anglo-Saxon hegemony" could ever be sufficiently just to create a stable and final international community. Rather than Strong's vision of a divinely appointed "final and complete solution" to world history, Niebuhr envisioned a "constitutional or quasi-constitutional system of the world order in which all nations, large and small, will have their due responsibilities and rights" (Reinhold Niebuhr 1943: 184) Niebuhr did not believe that the Anglo-Saxons would overrun every continent, displacing or assimilating those who lived there; instead, "[a]ll peoples and nations must find their place in the fellowship." He believed that the power of Britain and the United States was as much the result of "grace," or unwarranted

favor, as it was a result of virtue. Neither country was “good enough to deserve the position of leadership” (Reinhold Niebuhr 1943: 185). Finally, and most important in distinguishing him from Strong, Niebuhr rejected the idea of any racial superiority or absolute world dominance (Reinhold Niebuhr 1943).

Despite these qualifications, Niebuhr agreed with Strong on the essential point: that Anglo-Saxon political and moral principles were universally valid and superior to all others and that the duty of Anglo-Saxon Christians was to help spread these principles throughout the world. Niebuhr believed that “the Anglo-Saxon peoples” occupied a “position of destiny [that] carries with it tremendous responsibility . . . God has chosen us in this fateful period of world history” (Reinhold Niebuhr 1943: 186). He had chosen partially because of His grace but partially also because of the virtue of the United States and Britain, for

the political forms in which these nations move and the moral and political ideals that are woven into their history are less incompatible with international justice than any previous power of history. . . . The democratic traditions of the Anglo-Saxon world are actually the potential basis of a just world order (Reinhold Niebuhr 1943: 186).

Niebuhr believed, as most Social Gospellers had, that the moral and political traditions of the Anglo-Saxons, not their blood, made these people virtuous in the eyes of God and suitable instruments of His will. Furthermore, Niebuhr shared the Social Gospel belief that these traditions should be made the basis of a global organization, ensuring a better world.

The similarity between the two theologies extended to their views of Christianity as an essential element in the fulfillment of the world-historical destiny of the United States and Britain. For Niebuhr, national virtue fostered a pride that would render the Anglo-Saxons unable to fulfill their mission and could be chastened only by the church: “There is no cure for the pride of a virtuous nation but pure religion. . . . If the nations fail, therefore, the failure would be the consequence of the prior failure of the Christian church” (Reinhold Niebuhr 1943: 184). Niebuhr critiqued Anglo-Saxon righteousness and pretensions to eventual world dominance as Strong never would have, but Niebuhr had equal faith that without the church, the influence of American and British political principles would fall short of fulfilling their God-given goal.

By the end of the World War II, Niebuhr came to propound “a variant on that heresy of American exceptionalism that he so vigorously condemned in old-line liberal idealists.” He based his belief on the superiority of Anglo-Saxon political traditions, and in its extreme form, this belief constituted a “notion of America’s ‘election’” (Merkley 1975: 178, 187). True, Niebuhr did insist that Americanism (along with all other creeds) could never be perfect, and through his renunciation of all utopian projects, the neo-orthodox theologian had separated from his liberal

brethren. He furthermore continued to critique the United States throughout his career. Yet he had emerged from World War II propounding an Americanist internationalism that was consistent with that of Wilson and the early Social Gospellers. Niebuhr always remained a social Christian, especially when it came to international politics.

#### *NIEBUHRIAN AMERICANISM AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF CONTAINMENT*

Through the first two decades of the Cold War, while Niebuhr remained a consistent critic of the United States and its pretensions to perfection, his tendency to lionize the country's political traditions only became more pronounced (Reinhold Niebuhr 1951; see also Reinhold Niebuhr 1950). His vision of what a relatively virtuous people could accomplish developed as a counterpoint to his growing belief that communism could produce only "monstrous evils" (Reinhold Niebuhr 1952: 165). As these evils became more horrific in his eyes, Niebuhr's advocacy for the spread of democratic capitalism through military force became more fervent. The U.S. focus on opposing communism reinforced the liberal project of spreading American institutions, and Niebuhr led those who promoted such liberal interventionism. Indeed, Niebuhr and his students reformulated U.S. foreign policy around the belief that those institutions, properly reformed, could contain communism until it fell as the result of its own demonic contradictions.

When he published "Anglo-Saxon Destiny" in 1943, Niebuhr was still convinced that the Soviet Union embodied social, though not political, equality more purely than either the British Empire or the United States did. The Soviet Union had surpassed both Anglo-Saxon states in fulfilling the theologian's values of social justice. Niebuhr perceived the Soviets and the Chinese as necessary partners in the creation of a world order that would be based on the core values of the Anglo-Saxon nation-states (Reinhold Niebuhr 1943).

Yet as the war came to a close, the differences between the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union regarding the future of the world order began to become clear (Herring 2008). The Bretton Woods institutions, established in the summer of 1944, provided capital for the rebuilding of Western Europe, but it also made a strong case for a U.S.-led bloc of social democracies in that region and provided an attractive alternative to communism (Frieden 2006; Gaddis 2005). Churchill and Stalin met secretly later that year in Moscow to divide Eastern Europe between them, allowing the British to suppress a left-wing uprising in Greece (Herring 2008).

The opposition between the two superpowers mounted, and Niebuhr moved decisively into the vanguard of anticommunism. In what was probably the most



widely read piece of his entire career, a 1946 article in *Life* entitled “The Fight for Germany,” he advocated for armed resistance against the Soviet Union’s “hopes to conquer the whole of Europe strategically and ideologically” (Reinhold Niebuhr 1946: 65). By 1952, his willingness to work with the Revolutionary Left had evaporated completely and had been replaced by a theology that regarded communism as a diabolical force by its very nature. Niebuhr’s 1952 meditation, *The Irony of American History*, argued that an idealized conception of the poor provided communists with cover for the worst tyranny in world history, precisely because its visions of perfection led to great evil. Ultimately, he believed, the Soviet Union practiced “demonry” and would necessarily be destroyed from within (see Reinhold Niebuhr 1952: 128, 165, 170, and especially 173–174). Therefore, despite his well-known calls to judge not the enemy but the United States, Niebuhr saw only one possible way of relating to the Soviet Union (Reinhold Niebuhr 1952). The “pluralism” that was produced by democracy and capitalism provided the only available antidote to the universal pretension of communism. Therefore the American way had to be exported to arrest the advance of communism by diminishing its appeal. This strategy would serve to contain the Soviet threat until it collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions (Noble 1985).

In short, Niebuhr spent the decade from 1943 to 1952 formalizing his theological legitimation of U.S. intervention to spread American ideals; this became the principle that “underlay the philosophy of the liberal Cold Warriors” (Merkley 1975: 191). Niebuhr developed this principle along with his close friend and the founder of the policy of containment, George Kennan (Merkley 1975). Kennan’s “Long Telegram,” sent from Moscow in 1946, described a Soviet state that would inevitably seek international hegemony at the expense of the “traditional way of life of the United States.” However, in the face of resolute opposition, the Soviet Union would eventually have to moderate its extremism or collapse, as the contradictions between its “Messianic” message and the reality of politics became apparent. Thus

the thoughtful observer of Russian-American relations will find no cause for complaint in the Kremlin’s challenge to American society. He will rather experience a certain gratitude to a Providence which, by providing the American people with this implacable challenge, has made their entire security as a nation dependent on their pulling themselves together and accepting the responsibilities of moral and political leadership that history plainly intended them to bear (Kennan 1947: 582).

Kennan shared Niebuhr’s conclusion: The Anglo-Americans had a providential destiny to provide political leadership to the world, despite their political and moral flaws, because the United States was politically, morally, and spiritually superior to its new rival.

The policies that the Truman administration enacted in the early days of the Cold War reflected this grand strategy of containment. Yugoslavia, Albania, and Bulgaria had begun to back the left-wing rebels in Greece, forcing the British to withdraw in 1947. The U.S. leadership stepped in with an unprecedented peacetime foreign aid program, consisting of \$400 million in weaponry and cash and a 450-man advisory force, to stop what it perceived as a communist advance (Herring 2008). In the speech before Congress in which he proposed the program, President Truman articulated the tenets of the doctrine that bears his name. Echoing Niebuhr and Kennan, Truman spoke of opposition to the spread of communism through the spread of U.S. military and economic power and, wherever possible, political institutions (Truman 1947). His administration followed the intervention in Greece with the Marshall Plan, which was intended to rebuild Europe through the revival of democracy and market economies and thereby to reduce the appeal of state socialism (Gaddis 2005).

The Truman Doctrine had clear implications for what had become known as the Third World. U.S. moral superiority and the Soviet threat provided the rationale for increased U.S. intervention in the affairs of what Niebuhr called “non-technical” countries. The administration sought to bring these countries to freedom and Americanism after a period of U.S. supervision. Niebuhr began to speak of a duty for the United States to give “tutelage” to its “client states” (Merkley 1975: 193). The logic of tutelage gave immediate shape and meaning to the U.S. presence in Indo-China, on the Korean peninsula, and throughout Latin America (Herring 2008). The administration’s goal echoed that of Wilson in Latin America and, indeed, of the entire foreign policy in the early Social Gospel era (McDougall 1997).

Niebuhr endorsed the projection of U.S. power and institutions into weaker nation-states in the early years of the Cold War, believing that only such interventionist Americanism would lead to the best world that he saw as possible. In this, he followed closely behind the Social Gospellers against whom he sought to define himself. His revitalization of the social and political theology of U.S. liberal Protestantism bore as its ultimate fruit the grand strategy of containment, which rested on the same type of interventions and world-historical mission that Niebuhr had decried as a younger man. Containment sought to change the nature of the Soviet state—specifically, to make it more like the United States. In short, it provided the only form of intervention that was available in facing another superpower.

Furthermore, and more important for understanding the war in Iraq, Niebuhr and Kennan instilled this vision into the next generation of liberal policymakers, who would in turn train and mentor the men and women who became the architects of U.S. foreign policy after September 11, 2001. Those individuals,

known as neoconservatives, represent a tradition of militant global Americanism that stems from the Social Gospel.

### *CONCLUSIONS*

Social Gospellers believed that Anglo-Saxon institutions and culture, rather than biological superiority, made for American superiority and destiny. The Social Gospellers introduced the idea on which liberal internationalism and neoconservatism came to rest: that the world could and should be improved or even perfected through the molding of foreign populations that could then be granted their independence.

Over the course of the First and Second World Wars, liberals lost the idealism of Wilson and continued instead under the flag of Niebuhrian anticommunism. Niebuhr's political theology retained the idea that the United States was powerful and relatively virtuous because of its democratic heritage. Further, it retained the concept of Providential destiny expressed by Josiah Strong decades earlier. To fulfill its destiny, Niebuhr argued, the United States needed to realize the immense evil that opposed it.

It is therefore wrong to place the Social Gospel and the Niebuhrians on opposite sides of a historical debate over whether people can "be reasonable enough to resolve international conflicts peacefully" (Chernus 2007). The Social Gospellers preached a sharp cultural chauvinism, according to which military interventions in the affairs of "lesser" countries were not even counted as wars. Indeed, military occupations were necessary to civilize, Christianize, and democratize these "political children." Peace and war, they believed, were the business of the great powers. A similar logic lay behind the policies of the Cold War Niebuhrians and neoconservatives, even after the Soviet Union had fallen.

However, the purpose of this article is not to deny that there is a tradition of Christian pacifism in the United States. In fact, the Quakers and Mennonites have maintained this tradition for over three centuries in the face of numerous wars (Ahlstrom 1972). Many churches took antiwar stances in the 1960s and throughout the 1980s. Nor do we deny that the Social Gospel contributed to this tradition. A. J. Mustie, a contemporary of Niebuhr's, never abandoned his interwar pacifism and became a vital influence on Martin Luther King, Jr. (Lilje 2010).

The point is simply that this pacifism had little to do with the Social Gospel thinking that dominated U.S. foreign policy in its time. Social Christianity's vital contribution was a belief in the ability and duty of the United States to spread its way of life, through its military power where necessary. The continuity in U.S. foreign policy since the end of the Cold War is largely due to the consensus that has formed around this principle. Debates continue over which types of force

should be used, at what cost, and in what situations. The broad strategic vision, however, is consistent.

The consistency of religious support for militant Americanism is also worth noting. Most remarkably, the belief in an alliance between divine purpose and the spread of American institutions survived at least two severe disconfirmations: the failure of the League of Nations and the fall of the U.S.-backed regime in South Vietnam. Both of these events provoked a breakup of the denominational structure of American Protestantism, demonstrating that foreign affairs can affect religion as well as be affected by it (Gunn 2008). In both cases, however, a new religious movement arose to support the spread of Americanism by military means. In the case of the failure of Wilson's vision, the Social Gospellers lost faith in Americanism, and Niebuhrian neo-orthodoxy arose to help lead the country into World War II and shape the early days of its conflict with communism. Three decades later, the liberal Protestant mainline stepped away from militarism during the war in Vietnam, and the Christian Right mobilized to reinvigorate righteous military interventions.

However, these seismic shifts in the country's religious landscape may primarily reflect changes in the theology of the clergy alone. At least in the case of the war in Vietnam, there is strong evidence that while some liberal bishops and pastors came to vocally protest the U.S. presence in Indochina, the majority of their congregations continued to support it (Hero 1973). Furthermore, the disconnect between the liberal clergy and laity likely contributed to the decline of mainline denominations and the flight of believers to evangelical churches over the past forty years (Wellman 2008; see also Matzko 2010). On the other hand, laypeople and clergy both appear to have shifted toward isolationism after World War I, reflected in the difficulty Niebuhr had in convincing the country to intervene in Europe. The militancy of both liberal ministers and believers in the early years of the Cold War, however, suggests that it was only the "historic peace churches" such as the Quakers that truly represented pacifism even in the 1930s. This is, again, only a suggestion. Public opinion lies outside the concerns of this article. The focus here has been on a history of ideas articulated by religious and political elites and on the continuity in their thinking as it evolved through crises in both the church and the state. Nor has the goal been to provide exclusive explanations for why the United States chose to go to war; rather, our intention has been to describe the impact that religious thinking had on the strategic and tactical concerns that framed the decision. Interests are as much a part of this story as are ideas and beliefs, and the fact that *realpolitik* is largely absent from this article should not be thought to indicate otherwise.

It remains to be seen what shifts the apparent failure of Americanism in Iraq will provoke among policymakers and religious groups in the United States. Some evangelicals are moving away from participation in politics in general (see, e.g.,

Babcock 2008). Even among those who see Islam in general as a threat to U.S. security, such as Billy Graham's son Franklin (Miller and Date 2010), the topic of the day is treatment of Muslims in the United States rather than committing time and money to supporting the intervention in Iraq, as was the case seven years ago (Begos 2003). The neoconservative presence in the White House dwindled during George W. Bush's second term through a combination of scandal and infamy, much of it concerning Iraq in one way or another. The Obama administration declared an end to combat operations in Iraq and pledged to withdraw completely by the end of 2011 (Chaudry 2010).

Despite these shifts in the political and religious landscape, the idea that militant Americanism holds the key to history's problems appears to have endured another blow to its prestige in Iraq (Desch 2009). President Obama, addressing the committee that granted him a Nobel Peace Prize, spoke of the spread of capitalism and democracy as "a legacy for which my own country is rightfully proud." He rejected the "choice between the narrow pursuit of interests or an endless campaign to impose our values" and extended the mission of liberty into the future, "even as we respect the unique culture and traditions of different countries, America will always be a voice for those aspirations that are universal . . . it is the responsibility of all free people and free nations to make clear to these movements that hope and history are on their side" (Obama 2009).

The President then struck a Niebuhrian tone. As had the theologian, Obama called attention to the weaknesses of all people and nations: "We are fallible. We make mistakes, and fall victim to the temptations of pride, and power, and sometimes evil." However, as Niebuhr had, he continued on to make clear the necessity of force: "make no mistake: evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. . . . To say that force is sometimes necessary is not a call to cynicism—it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason" (Obama 2009).

The finishing note to the President's lecture on peace, however, hearkened back to core of the Social Gospel:

But we do not have to think that human nature is perfect for us to still believe that the human condition can be perfected. . . . As Dr. King said at this occasion so many years ago, "I refuse to accept despair as the final response to the ambiguities of history. I refuse to accept the idea that the 'isness' of man's present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal 'oughtness' that forever confronts him."

Let us reach for the world that ought to be—that spark of the divine that still stirs within each of our souls. . . . We can acknowledge that oppression will always be with us, and still strive for justice. We can admit the intractability of depravation, and still strive for dignity. Clear-eyed, we can understand that there will be war, and still strive for peace (Obama 2009).

“The Kingdom,” he could have said with Rauschenbusch, “is always but coming.”

We thus still live in an epoch of dreams for a better world brought about by American power, ideals, and institutions, deployed together in the name of the divine to resist evil and free foreign populations without establishing permanent dominion over them. Such interventionism, with the promise of independence after tutelage, is an inescapable part of this country’s liberal heritage. Liberals and conservatives, both secular and religious, must face it squarely as we move forward in a world where Anglo-American hegemony is no longer a prophecy but a substantial reality with an uncertain future.

#### REFERENCES

- Abrams, Ray. 1933. *Preachers Present Arms*. Grand Rapids: University of Michigan Press.
- Ahlstrom, Sydney E. 1972. *A Religious History of the American People*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Babcock, Michael. 2008. *UnChristian America: Living with Faith in a Nation That Was Never Under God*. Carol Stream, IL: SaltRiver.
- Barth, Karl. 1933. *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2nd Edition, translated by Sir Edwyn Hoskyns. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Begos, Kevin. 2003. “Iraq’s Good Samaritans.” *Christianity Today* 47: 64–66. Available at <http://www.ctlibrary.com/ct/2003/november/5.64.html>.
- Bush, George W. 2002. *Introduction to the National Security Strategy of 2002*. Washington DC: White House. Available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/nssintro.html>.
- Cayton, Andrew, and Fred Anderson. 2005. *The Dominion of War: Empire and Conflict in America, 1500–2000*. New York: Penguin.
- Chaudry, Serena. 2010. “US Troops Below 50,000 as Combat Ends.” Reuters, August 24. Available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE67L15520100824>.
- Chernus, Ira. 2006. *Monsters to Destroy: The Neoconservative War on Terror and Sin*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.
- Chernus, Ira. 2007. “The Theology of American Empire.” *Foreign Policy in Focus*. Available at [http://www.fpif.org/articles/the\\_theology\\_of\\_american\\_empire](http://www.fpif.org/articles/the_theology_of_american_empire).
- Desch, Michael C. 2009. “Woodrow Wilson’s War.” *The National Interest* 99: 87–96. Available at <http://nationalinterest.org/bookreview/woodrow-wilsons-war-2957>.
- Dibble, Ernest F. 1977. *Young Prophet Niebuhr: Reinhold Niebuhr’s Early Search for Social Justice*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Dorrien, Gary. 2001. *The Making of American Liberal Theology, Volume 1: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1805–1900*. Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Dorrien, Gary. 2003. *The Making of American Liberal Theology, Volume 2: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1900–1950*. Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Dorrien, Gary. 2004. *Imperial Designs: Neoconservatism and the New Pax Americana*. New York: Routledge.

- Dorrien, Gary. 2007. "Kingdom Coming: Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis*." *The Christian Century* 124: 29.
- Dorrien, Gary. 2010. *Economy, Difference, Empire: Social Ethics for Social Justice*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Eisenach, Eldon J. 1994. *The Lost Promise of Progressivism*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press
- Evans, Christopher H. 2004. *The Kingdom Is Always But Coming: A Life of Walter Rauschenbusch*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Frieden, Jeffrey. 2006. *Global Capitalism: Its Fall and Rise in the Twentieth Century*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Gaddis, John Lewis. 2005. *The Cold War: A New History*. New York: Penguin.
- Gladden, Washington. 1889. *Applied Christianity: Moral Aspects of Social Questions*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin.
- Gladden, Washington. 1916. *Forks of the Road: Our National Problems*. New York: Macmillan.
- Gorrell, Donald K. 1988. *The Age of Social Responsibility: The Social Gospel in the Progressive Era, 1900–1920*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press.
- Gunn, T. Jeremy. 2008. *Spiritual Weapons: The Cold War and the Forging of an American National Religion*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Hero, Alfred O. 1973. *American Religious Groups View Foreign Policy: Trends in Rank-and-File Opinion, 1937–1969*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Herring, George C. 2008. *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Herron, George D. 1917. *Woodrow Wilson and the World's Peace*. New York: Mitchell Kennerly.
- Hobsbawm, Eric. 1994. *Age of Empire: 1875–1914*. New York: Abacus.
- Hoff, Joan. 2008. *A Faustian Foreign Policy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Kennan, George [under pseudonym "X"]. 1947. "The Sources of Soviet Conduct." *Foreign Affairs* 25: 566–582. Available at <http://www.historyguide.org/europe/kennan.html>.
- Lilje, Nathan. 2010. "A Time for War: Reinhold Niebuhr, Norman Thomas, A. J. Muste, and the Unraveling of the Protestant Pacifism of the Interwar Period." Paper presented at the University of Washington, Seattle, May.
- Magee, Malcolm D. 2008. *What the World Should Be: Woodrow Wilson and the Crafting of a Faith-Based Foreign Policy*. Waco: Baylor University Press.
- Marty, Martin. 1970. *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America*. New York: Dial Press.
- Mathews, Shailer. 1918. *Patriotism and Religion*. New York: Macmillan.
- Matzko, Paul. 2010. "Review of Alfred O. Hero, *American Religious Groups View Foreign Policy: Trends in Rank-and-File Opinion, 1937–1969*." *Religion in America*. Available at <http://religioninamerica.org/2010/03/06/american-religious-groups-view-foreign-policy-trends-in-rank-and-file-opinion-1937-1969-alfred-o-hero/>.
- Mazower, Mark. 2000. *Dark Continent*. New York: Vintage Books.
- McDougall, Walter A. 1997. *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter*

- with the World Since 1776*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Merkley, Paul. 1975. *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Political Account*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Miller, Joshua, and Jack Date. 2010. "Heated Debate over Place of Islam in the United States." *This Week with Christine Amanpour* October 3. Available at <http://abcnews.go.com/ThisWeek/heated-debate-place-islam-united-states/story?id=11786737>.
- Niebuhr, H. Richard. 1932a. "The Grace of Doing Nothing." *The Christian Century* 49: 379.
- Niebuhr, H. Richard. 1932b. "The Only Way into the Kingdom of God." *The Christian Century* 49: 447.
- Niebuhr, Reinhold. 1932. "Must We Do Nothing?" *The Christian Century* 42: 416–417.
- Niebuhr, Reinhold. 1934. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Niebuhr, Reinhold. 1938. "Karl Barth and Democracy." *Radical Religion* 4: 4.
- Niebuhr, Reinhold. 1941a. "The Christian Faith and the World Crisis." *Christianity and Crisis* February 10: 4–6.
- Niebuhr, Reinhold. 1941b. "America's Last Chance." *Christianity and Crisis* July 14: 1–2.
- Niebuhr, Reinhold. 1943. "Anglo-Saxon Destiny and Responsibility." *Christianity and Crisis* October 4: 2–4.
- Niebuhr, Reinhold. 1946. "The Fight for Germany." *Life* October 21: 65–72.
- Niebuhr, Reinhold. 1950. "The Idolatry of America." In *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, edited by D. B. Robertson, 94–97. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press.
- Niebuhr, Reinhold. 1951. "Ten Fateful Years." *Christianity and Crisis* February 5: 4.
- Niebuhr, Reinhold. 1952. *The Irony of American History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Niebuhr, Reinhold. 1956. *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*. Hamden, CT: Shoe String Press.
- Niebuhr, Reinhold. 1957a. "A Critique of Pacifism." In *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, edited by D. B. Robertson, 241–247. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press.
- Niebuhr, Reinhold. 1957b. "Why I Leave the F.O.R." In *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, edited by D. B. Robertson, 254–259. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press.
- Niebuhr, Reinhold. 1957c. "Pacifism Against the Wall." In *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, edited by D. B. Robertson, 260–266. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press.
- Noble, David W. 1985. *The End of American History: Democracy, Capitalism, and the Metaphor of Two Worlds in Anglo-American Historical Writing, 1880–1980*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Obama, Barack. 2009. "Nobel Lecture." Oslo, Norway, December 10. Available at [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/obama-lecture\\_en.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/obama-lecture_en.html).
- Pettitt, Claire. 2007. *Dr. Livingstone, I Presume?: Missionaries, Journalists, Explorers, and Empire*. London: Profile Books.



- Rauschenbusch, Walter. 1915. "Editorial." *Rochester Herald* August 23.
- Rauschenbusch, Walter. 1917. *A Theology for the Social Gospel*. New York: Macmillan.
- Rouse, Adam. 2004. "Conceptualizing Context: Dynamic Design Through Tidal Interface." Master's Thesis, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH.
- Strong, Josiah. 1885. *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis*. New York: American Home Mission Society.
- Thomas, Norman. 1951. *A Socialist's Faith*. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press.
- Thompson, Michael G. 2007. "An Exception to Exceptionalism: A Reflection on Reinhold Niebuhr's Vision of 'Prophetic' Christianity and the Problem of Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy." *American Quarterly* 59: 833–855.
- Truman, Harry S. 1947. "Address Before a Joint Session of Congress, March 12, 1947." Available at [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/trudoc.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/trudoc.asp).
- U.S. Congress. 1898. "Joint Resolution of Congress, April 20, 1898." Washington, D.C. Available at <http://www.historyofcuba.com/history/teller.htm>.
- Wellman, James K., Jr. 2008. *Evangelical vs. Liberal: The Clash of Christian Churches in the Pacific Northwest*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, Walter L. 1980. "United States Indian Policy and the Debate over Philippine Annexation: Implications for the Origins of American Imperialism." *Journal of American History* 66: 810–831.
- Wilson, Woodrow. 1902. "The Ideals of America." *Atlantic Monthly* 90: 721–734. Available at [www.theatlantic.com/issues/02dec/wilson.htm](http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/02dec/wilson.htm).
- Wilson, Woodrow. 1917a. "War Message to Congress." April 2. Senate Doc. No. 5, Serial No. 7264, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Available at [http://www.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Wilson%27s\\_War\\_Message\\_to\\_Congress](http://www.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Wilson%27s_War_Message_to_Congress).
- Wilson, Woodrow. 1917b. "'Peace Without Victory' Speech, January 22, 1917." In *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, Volume 40: November 20, 1916-January 23, 1917*, edited by Arthur S. Link, 533–539. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Wilson, Woodrow. 1918. "Speech on the Fourteen Points," January 8. *Congressional Record*, 65th Congress 2nd Session. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Available at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1918wilson.html>.
- Wilson, Woodrow. 1919. "The Text of President Wilson's Address to Congress." *New York Times* July 11.
- Wilson, Woodrow. 1972 [1900]. "The Real Idea of Democracy: A Talk" In *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, Volume 12: 1900–1901*, edited by Arthur S. Link, 175–179. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Wilson, Woodrow. 1979 [1914]. "Letter to House, August 3, 1914." In *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, Volume 30: May–September, 1914*, edited by Arthur S. Link, 336. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Wilson, Woodrow. 1982 [1916]. "An Address to the Commercial Club of Omaha, October 5, 1916." In *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, Volume 38: August 7–November 19, 1916*, edited by Arthur S. Link, 336–342. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.