

The Social Principles of Jesus:
A Reexamination of Walter Rauschenbusch's 1916 Social Gospel Text

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The Social Principles of Jesus is a seminal text in the oeuvre of Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918), one of America's preeminent religious writers of the early twentieth century, and is a landmark in the formation of what came to be known as the Social Gospel movement. This slim volume is, in the author's words, nothing less than an "attempt to formulate in simple propositions the fundamental convictions of Jesus about the social and ethical relations and duties of men" (*SPJ*, v). Taking the form of a pedagogical treatise, *Social Principles* reads as both a finely tuned analysis of the modern relevance of the teachings of Jesus, and an impassioned plea on the part of its author for an end to the folly of interpreting Christianity solely in "individualistic" terms. It is Rauschenbusch's expressed aim to resurrect the core teachings of Jesus, which are social and ethical, and apply these to a renewed, socially conscious liberal democracy, establishing a grand harmony between religion, ethics, and social evolution. How far this vision was from the burgeoning "fundamentalism" of his day (and ours) is more than evidenced by the critical reaction of many of his more conservative peers, but also indicates the continuing relevance of his work for theologians and others looking for alternative paths. One criticism of Rauschenbusch was of what many saw as an optimism bordering on naïveté. Rauschenbusch wrote several of his important works during the epoch-ending event of World War I (i.e., "the Great War"), which shattered for so many late Victorian liberal dreams of progress and hopes for peace between "civilized" nations. Rauschenbusch says, with what has to be considered understatement: "Our generation is profoundly troubled by the problems of organized society" (*SPJ*, v). For many of the disillusioned, religion itself would have to be abandoned; for others, the bourgeois-capitalist ideals that led ("inevitably") to such catastrophe should be jettisoned. For his own part, Rauschenbusch aimed in books such as *Social Principles* to resurrect the essential teachings of Jesus, which are fundamentally social and ethical, and apply these to a renewed, socially conscious liberal democracy, establishing a grand harmony between religion, ethics, and social evolution.

Rauschenbusch begins *Social Principles* by lamenting the death of praxis in Christian teaching, which has been lost, or, at best, "enveloped in a haze" through which we can only just glimpse the fundamental tenets of Jesus the socio-ethical teacher as if through a glass, darkly. These are some questions Rauschenbusch attempts to wrestle with in this work: "How did Jesus view the life and personality of the men about him? How did he see the social relation which binds people together? What was the reaction of his mind in the face of the inequalities of actual society?" (*SPJ*, 1). These, the author insists, are the keys to understanding Jesus' social principles, and as such warrant careful reflection and promote a continued exegetical inspection and interpretation of the Gospels.

The first axiom of Jesus' "social principles" is found in various passages in Matthew and Luke, where, in his treatment of children (Mark 10:13–16), lepers (Matt. 8:1–4), "outcasts" (Luke 15:1–10), and delinquents (Luke 19:10), he puts forth what amounts to a revolutionary ethic founded on the sacredness of human life, *all* human life—an ethic which transcends rudimentary notions of "justice" (which implies equitable

reward and punishment) by stressing action always “with a sense of the worth of human life.” In short, one which, via the strength of Jesus’ own personality, “affirm[s] the human instinct unconsciously and intelligently, and raise[s] it to the dignity of a social principle” (SPJ, 8). As a “new type” of human, Jesus saw human beings through the spiritually charged atmosphere and point of view of a fatherly God “who lets his light shine on just and unjust, and offers forgiveness and love to all” (SPJ, 9). For Rauschenbusch, this sets a “spiritual support” for democracy and civil liberty. Echoing John Ruskin before him and Albert Schweitzer after, he says: “When we are at our best, we feel the sacredness of human life” (SPJ, 11). He then goes on to (rather naïvely, it seems) express a view that America, whose laws “do not intend to recognize class differences,” may be at the forefront of the revival of these principles. Showing a somewhat surprising allegiance to John Locke, he asks: “Is not property essential to the real freedom and self-expression of a human personality?” (SPJ, 12) The real danger to social harmony is neither patriotism nor private property, but rather the “cold indifference” towards the “less attractive mass of humanity” that is promoted by scientific study and enhanced by “our plentiful natural egotism.” It is important to note that Rauschenbusch’s Jesus is not a gentle Lamb but rather a Nietzschean *Übermensch*: a fiery, powerful, and free personality who, as a beacon for healthy individualism, demands that others have the right “to become free and strong souls” like him. His spirit is both an awakening and overcoming one, and it is up to every individual to accept, reaffirm, and incorporate the challenge of Jesus, the “creator of strong men” (SPJ, 14).

After “reverence for personality” comes the second axiom of “solidarity,” which is based on what has come to be known as the Golden Rule: *Love God, and your neighbor as yourself*. “Love is the social instinct which binds men together and makes them indispensable to one another” (SPJ, 17). For “[w]hoever demands love, demands solidarity...[w]hoever sets love first, sets fellowship high.” We have a deep-seated social instinct which is satisfied by all the various forms of friendship, adumbrated by Rauschenbusch as “[s]ex admiration, parental love, ‘the dear love of comrades’, the thrill of patriotism, [and] the joy of play” (SPJ, 23). In explaining (justifying?) the inclusion of “patriotism” in this list of loves, Rauschenbusch says that it is a quality well intentioned but often misused, being in essence “a prophetic outreaching toward a great fellowship nowhere realized” (SPJ, 24). A laudable ethic, it would seem, though one laden with questionable historical effects. Indeed, he concludes this section with nothing less than a plea for a “worldwide monotheistic faith”—such, it seems, would entail the end to religious division and usher in a new era of religious solidarity. This is the most dubious (as well as the most “dated”) part of the work.

With these two central axioms established, the next task, says Rauschenbusch, is the confrontation of social realities with these weapons in hand. To do so we must start with a review of how Jesus himself confronted the social realities of his own situation, in his promise of both social *and* religious emancipation (Luke 4:16–22, 6:20–26; Matt. 9:35–10:1, 21:1–11, 25:31–46). For Rauschenbusch, these passages in particular reveal that Jesus’ concern for the poor was the *necessary result* of the two axioms already presented, for “he could not be at ease among suffering” (SPJ, 39). Following the Old Testament prophets, glad tidings have come for the poor, sight for the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. It is interesting that Rauschenbusch takes the suffering people to be the peasants (“from whom Peter and John sprang”), who “were not morons, or the sodden dregs of city slums...[but] were the patient, hard-working

folks who have always made up the rank and file of all peoples" (*SPJ*, 40). As in Marx, we see in Rauschenbusch a romanticization of the honest hardworking man and a distaste for the lowest of the low, the truly destitute. In the Greek language there is a distinction between the poor peasants (*penes*) and the really destitute outcasts (*ptochos*). According to Dominic Crossan, it is the latter group who were the "sufferers" (and also many of the followers) of Jesus. Thus, though "the strong must stand up for the weak," it is not altogether clear where the lines are to be drawn. Are only the upright workers to be redeemed, but not the lepers and *lumpen*?

In succeeding sections, Rauschenbusch takes up ideas that, unlike those previously discussed, are not original but rather derived by Jesus from the historic life of the "Hebrew people." The Kingdom of God is the "master fact" (Matt. 4:17) and as such challenges human beings to transform or remake their condition, their *entire* way of life. Here we may see Tolstoy's influence of Rauschenbusch, but while for Tolstoy *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, for Rauschenbusch it is primarily social, with baptism its circumcision—"the mark of a national and social movement toward a new era" and sign of inclusion in a transformed community (Mark 1:28). Rauschenbusch cites Jesus' anti-asceticism (Mark 2:18–22) as proof that his religion was happy and sunny—a "song of divine carelessness" (though less the "recklessness of a tramp who has lost his self-respect and his capacity for long outlooks" than "the carelessness of an aristocratic spirit, conscious of his high human dignity" (*SPJ*, 52). In short, Jesus as the hero of *Leaves of Grass*. The essence of Jesus' social message is of course the Sermon on the Mount, where "[a]ll who felt the divine dissatisfaction with themselves and craving for social justice and righteousness would get their satisfaction...[as] higher social virtues, gentleness, purity of heart, peaceableness...gain ascendancy" (*SPJ*, 56; Matt. 5:5–10). This, for Rauschenbusch, is *pure religion*, and such a sentiment was clearly "called forth by religious faith in a social ideal." It was Jesus who re-invoked the lost political aspect of the prophets, which had, by his time, become exclusively "theological," but he did so only by transforming the sometimes virulent apocalypticism of the prophets into "a call for universal human fraternity" (*SPJ*, 58). Moreover, it is in *seeking* the Kingdom of God that humanity realizes itself, and becomes fully human. Rauschenbusch repeatedly emphasizes this questing motif.

What are the tasks of the Kingdom of God? Once again we see the Spirit of Capitalism emerge in Rauschenbusch's reading of the Gospels, as he cites as crucial the well-known parable of the master who rewards the servant who invests and doubles his money, while castigating (i.e., damning to hell) the lazy servant who buried his talents in fear of his unrighteous master. Despite what many see as its ambiguities, Rauschenbusch has no trouble with the meaning of this parable, giving it a Social Darwinian spin: "Jesus would have agreed that to live an unproductive life is one of the cardinal sins...[e]volution and Christianity agree on that" (*SPJ*, 65). Moreover, the author goes on to cite the "call to action" given by Jesus, by which we must drop all worldly pursuits and family connections to follow him—an ethic which seems to contradict the message of familial solidarity and this-worldly striving espoused by Rauschenbusch throughout *Social Principles*. What remains consistent is the Nietzschean character of Rauschenbusch's Jesus, that powerful, energetic, creative, and combative personality which, embodied in the Christian spirit, has contributed immensely to human progress at all levels, even the smallest, where "every real conversion means a break with debasing habits...more self control, more responsiveness to duty, more capacity to take a long outlook, *and consequently better*

work" (*SPJ*, 72, my emphasis). While Rauschenbusch insists the idea of the Kingdom of God "is not identified with any special social theory," it is rather curious how nicely it seems to conflate with a very specific Western, capitalist, and liberal-democratic social theory.

As far as social relations between individuals go, there must be an "advance" in ethics corresponding to the (evolutionary) progressive "advance" in the social relations of humans. A true Christian social ethics requires, in short, three things: *obedience*—in living up to the old standards and facing our sins sincerely (Luke 3:2–9); *expansion*—of our "area of obligation" to include "the alien and the heretic" (though not, it would seem, the idle and destitute...) (Luke 10:25–37); and *assimilation*—of the new, a progressive contextualization of standards, always moving, however, in a higher or "stricter" direction (Matt. 5:17–20). Jesus, says Rauschenbusch, "was working his way toward evolutionary conceptions [that] were so new to his followers he [had to] put them in parable form to avoid antagonism" (*SPJ*, 88). Combining creativity with progress and conservatism with radicalism, Jesus (and Rauschenbusch) asks for an *intensified* look at the Law, in terms of its *spirit* rather than its *letter* (*SPJ*, 89). In today's world, says the author, it is up to us to do the same, in supporting abstinence from drugs, for instance, not on the authority of ancient Christian practice but in the spirit of Christianity and modern life, both of which "demand an undrugged nervous system for quick and steady reactions" (*SPJ*, 91).

Since ambition is, in a broad sense, innate (Nietzsche's Will to Power?), it cannot be eliminated, but must be channeled into "serving humanity." We must follow Jesus, who, in the stillness of the desert, resisted the temptations of worldly power (Matt. 3:1–10) in favor of a "leadership of service" (Matt. 9:35–10:4, 20:20–28). "The desire to lead and excel is natural and right" (*SPJ*, 106), but while the old way of leadership was "to knock others down and climb up on them," the new way is "to get underneath and boost" (*SPJ*, 108). With reference to the world of business, the author sees many indications that a "conscious spiritual change" is on the way, whereby business leaders will look beyond their immediate needs and focus on more universal values. Here Rauschenbusch is once again caught between two personal beliefs, one in the inevitability of progressive societal evolution and the other in the movement to actively change the system that exploits and degrades so many honest and upright workers. In the end, he seems to slide into a naïve progressivism (e.g., "Being moral in business makes 'business sense' in the long run," he says, without elaborating as to how and why this might be).

Rauschenbusch faces a similar difficulty with the issue of private property, which is "at the same time a necessary expression of personality and a stimulator of character, and on the other hand a chief outlet and fortification of selfishness" (*SPJ*, 116). Yet, he proclaims, private property is a "blessing" that must be "conserved and spread," for there seems to be room for both spiritual and material stuff, which "in a balanced life...work side by side in peace, and each may aid the other" (*SPJ*, 120). It is a matter of how one *gains* and *uses* wealth and property; in doing so we must reject sumptuous living and take into account the want and misery of our fellow human beings. For Rauschenbusch, Jesus' exclamation about the rich man's difficulty (i.e., impossibility) in entering the Kingdom is a profoundly "saddened" one. The author concludes with a probing question that could, ironically, be turned to some degree upon his own exegetical work in *Social Principles*: Jesus, he says, "seems to have emphasized (the dangers connected with property) more fully and frequently than the evils of

licentiousness or drunkenness. The modern Church has reversed the relative emphasis. Why?" (*SPJ*, 122).

Rauschenbusch makes clear that he is not trying to read "methods" or "viewpoints of political economy" into the teachings of Jesus, whose concern was for "the spiritual vitality and soundness of the individual, and for human relations existing among men" (*SPJ*, 124). But are these not, in some sense, the roots of politics? As Dominic Crossan has argued, "Jesus was not just a teacher or a preacher in purely intellectual terms...He not only discussed the Kingdom of God; he enacted it, and said others could do so as well...you cannot ignore the pointedly political overtones of the very term *Kingdom of God* itself" (Crossan, *Jesus*, 93). Jesus' message was political *by virtue of being a life lived among others*, though his "politics" were not separated in any way from his "ethics" or his "theology." Rauschenbusch has difficulties not only with the lazy and the destitute, but also with those who interpret Jesus' message communistically; whether these be Münster Anabaptists or medieval cenobites, they fall prey to "an enormous misinterpretation of Christianity" (*SPJ*, 125). Again, *Social Principles* emphasizes proper stewardship in relation to wealth and property, which are held by inalienable right—a right that is "a corollary of the right to life" (*SPJ*, 127).

Religion must be *socially efficient*, says Rauschenbusch, echoing the just-developing school of pragmatism headed by William James (and eventually passed on to Richard Rorty, Rauschenbusch's grandson). Religious doctrines such as the Sabbath "must have social values; this is the essential test even in religion" (*SPJ*, 133; cf. Mark 2:23–3:5). In other words, *the Truth must be the Good, and the Good must be Social*. Criticizing the Jews of Jesus' time for their slavish obeisance to the minutiae of the Law and their false social divisions based on "purity," Rauschenbusch argues that a "socially efficient religion would have prompted the good people to establish loving and saving contact with [the] suffering people" (*SPJ*, 137). Has Christianity been a socially efficient religion, even with these principles in hand? Rauschenbusch goes on to argue that religion and ethics are in fact inseparable, and this is what Jesus was trying to show his followers and those whom he condemned for their "unsociability" (*SPJ*, 140). One could go further than Rauschenbusch and say, as Crossan and A.N. Wilson have done, that, for Jesus, *religion, ethics, and politics are one*, i.e., inseparable and indivisible elements of his lived message. "Even the ordinances of religion must justify themselves by making an effective contribution to the Kingdom of God"; they must be judge not on the basis of ancient authority but by "the present good of men" (*SPJ*, 141). Laudable intent, once again, but is this "religion" or simply humanism when the transcendent is no longer the ultimate standard? This of course has been a problem in much of the modernist theology that developed during and after Rauschenbusch's time.

Another important facet of the Kingdom of God, says the author, is the conflict with evil, which must be conceived in its social as well as individual manifestations: "The advance of the Kingdom of God is not simply a process of social education, but [also involves] a conflict with hostile forces which resist, neutralize, and defy whatever works towards the true social order" (*SPJ*, 151). Moreover, evil is not just, as per Aristotle, ignorance of the Good; it is an "organized" and "permanent" force "which vitiates every higher movement" (cf. Matt. 13:24–30). We must *fight* for the Kingdom, for Jesus came not to send peace, but a sword (Matt. 10:34–39). Rauschenbusch's Jesus transcends, once again, all dualities of character: he "blended gentleness and virility, forgiving love and uncompromising boldness" (*SPJ*, 157). Yet Rauschenbusch himself reiterates the inherited Christian dualism of spirit and flesh (only recently being put into question) in

his interpretation of evil, which is essentially the triumph of the “strong and clamorous” bodily/animal drives over the “sluggish and faint” spiritual/higher drives (*SPJ*, 158). The solution to the problem of evil lies for Rauschenbusch in evangelism, which constitutes “a spiritual re-enforcement of incomparable energy” that “gives a sense of freedom and newness,” enabling one to successfully combat vice and iniquity (*SPJ*, 160). This seems to be, ultimately, an individualistic response to evil, prompting the question of effective praxis in the face of large-scale societal evils, where even a transformed person may be powerless. Rauschenbusch seems to rest all his hopes on the Christian Church (whatever that means, exactly, from a Protestant perspective): “The Church is the permanent social factor in salvation” (*SPJ*, 164). However, though the Church must lead the way, it cannot stand alone, it “has cause to realize that many social forces outside its immediate organization must be used if the entire community is to be ‘christianized.’” The theocratic overtones of this remark do not go down well in our day, and moreover offer little in the way of actual practical insight in an age when the Church, even if unified, holds little actual power *vis-à-vis* other institutions of power in society.

Rauschenbusch’s final discussion is of the Cross as a social principle, in which he interprets the Cross as primarily a symbol of vicarious suffering, and as such a spur to social redemption through action (*SPJ*, 167). Jesus’ death was “the highest demonstration of a permanent law of human life” (*SPJ*, 175)—the *witness of just suffering*. “If the suffering of good men puts a just issue where all can see and understand, it intensifies and consolidates the right feeling of community” (*SPJ*, 179). Yet we must not glorify suffering in itself, for if pain does not force the elimination of its own cause, it is merely an “added evil” (*SPJ*, 180). Needless to say, in the end the Resurrection of Christ is less important to the Social Gospel than the actual lived life of Jesus. Rauschenbusch looks to Mark 1:14–20, where Jesus calls his disciples, as “the beginning of the greatest moment in history.” It is the living Jesus calling his followers to service that is “the germinal cell of that vast social movement of which foreign missions, the establishment of the American Republic, and the modern labor movement are products” (*SPJ*, 190).

Despite the problems that have been raised in this exposition, *The Social Principles of Jesus* has a poetic force that emanates from Rauschenbusch’s own sense of personal calling, a power reminiscent of the best writings of Thoreau, Tolstoy, Gandhi, and Albert Schweitzer. His faith in the social element, or more accurately, the social *core* of such is inspirational, and his message still important despite the dated language and supercessionist tendencies. As we have seen, the problems of *The Social Principles* can be traced to its author’s dual commitment to a) social justice as an active movement towards social, economic, and political change, and b) the liberal-democratic, capitalist ideal in a gradual but inevitable “progress” towards a brighter and more civilized future. Rauschenbusch’s Jesus is indeed a radical, but he is not a revolutionary of the anarchistic or communistic sense; in fact, he seems to prefigure quite miraculously the ideals enshrined in the Constitution of the American Republic! Again, though, it is easy to judge from our somewhat jaded twenty-first-century eyes, particularly those of us who recall a war even more terrible than the one going on when this book was published, but we can forgive much of Rauschenbusch’s embarrassing ebullience about his country and ideals when we realize how badly he sought to reinvigorate his readers with hope for a better future.

In short, Rauschenbusch provides a decidedly novel interpretation of the “social gospel,” one that has influenced countless scholars and theologians since, often

prompting even more radical interpretations of the message of Jesus with regard to the poor and oppressed. While he would not have agreed with all the conclusions of Dominic Crossan, Walter Rauschenbusch would likely have assented to the following remark from Crossan's *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*: "To remove...that which is radically subversive, socially revolutionary, and politically dangerous from Jesus' *actions* is to leave his life meaningless and his death inexplicable" (Crossan, *Jesus*, 93).

Bibliography

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