

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH IN THE THEOLOGY OF THE SOCIAL GOSPEL

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NO ONE could deny that the Church has a mission *in* the United States. But does the Church have a mission *to* the United States? The shift of the preposition in the second question focuses its force in the following direction: Does the Church have a mission to the "secular" elements of American society? Does the Church have a specific role in the public order of life in the United States? By the public sphere I refer to the objective social order, including the social institutions of the political and economic spheres that structure our common life in a pluralistic society. Can one justify theologically a public mission of the Christian churches to American society that transcends a narrowly defined religious sphere or that is not limited to addressing individuals independently of the objective institutions in which they participate?

In the discussion that follows I wish to address this question by presenting the response given it by the theology of the social gospel. To a large extent the theology of the social gospel is a peculiarly American phenomenon,¹ part of whose essence is an interpretation of the Christian message and Church as having a role to play in the public sphere. It may be instructive, therefore, to trace the lines of the argument of the social gospelers and to ask at the end whether or not some of the themes of this theology may be retrievable and relevant for today's situation. I am convinced they are.

The term "the social gospel" refers primarily to a social movement within the churches of North America, both in the U.S. and Canada, which responded to the social injustices that emerged in the wake of the industrialization in the 19th century. Allowing for developments leading up to it and away from it, the dates of the movement in the U.S. can be

¹ Sydney Ahlstrom writes that the social gospel was "a movement which has been widely hailed at home and abroad as the most distinctive contribution of the American churches to world Christianity" (Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* [New Haven: Yale University, 1972] 786). For the history of the social-gospel movement, see Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1869-1915* (New Haven: Yale University, 1940), and Robert C. White and Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1976). For an interpretation of how the social-gospel movement evolved out of 18th- and 19th-century Protestant revivalism and its individualism, see H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959) 127-63.

roughly put between 1890 and 1920. In its first moment the movement applied Christian values to the social situation; negatively it was critical of the social conditions in the U.S., and positively it generated many of the social agencies in the churches with which we are familiar today. While it was principally a movement unevenly distributed within the Protestant churches, there were parallel developments within Roman Catholicism.² Although at its start it was not primarily a theological movement, a theology was implied in it, and gradually through a whole host of thinkers, both popular and academic, there arose a distinct theological rationalization of the Christian message which can be called "the theology of the social gospel." And even though the representatives of this theology of the social gospel were not all saying exactly the same thing, there are a number of axes of commonality which merit the generalized title. In the sketch that I shall give I focus on the two foremost theologians of the social gospel, Shailer Mathews and Walter Rauschenbusch.

I

Shailer Mathews (1863–1941) was born in Maine and after study at Newton Theological Institution, some teaching experience at his alma mater Colby College, and some study of history and historiographical method in Germany, he was offered a position at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago in 1894. He was dean there from 1908 until his retirement in 1933. Mathews was a prolific writer on both the scholarly and popular levels.³ He was an indefatigable speaker, and though never ordained he was very active in the Baptist Church. Not long after his arrival at the University of Chicago, he published a series of articles on the social teaching of Jesus.⁴ This began a public commitment to the social gospel which he defended right on through the 1930s until his death in 1941.

Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918) was born in Rochester, New York, and finished his preparation for the ministry at Rochester Theological Seminary in 1886. Assigned as pastor of a Baptist congregation on West 45th Street in Manhattan, he became deeply involved in the urban

² For the development of the movement of the social gospel within the Catholic Church, see "Toward a Social Gospel," in Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985) 321–46.

³ Mathews' autobiography is entitled *New Faith for Old: An Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1936). For a complete bibliography of Mathews' works, see William D. Lindsey, "Shailer Mathews: A Comprehensive Bibliography," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 6 (1985) 3–27.

⁴ Shailer Mathews, "Christian Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology* 1–2 (1895–96, 1896–97). These articles were gathered together and published as Shailer Mathews, *The Social Teaching of Jesus: An Essay in Christian Sociology* (New York: Macmillan, 1897).

dilemmas of poverty and unemployment that plagued his people. At first the actual demands on his time were in complete contradiction to his piety, his training, and the expected role of the minister. Yet he gradually underwent a kind of second conversion to a social interpretation of the gospel which was symbolized and encapsulated in the concept of the kingdom of God. "[M]y desire," Rauschenbusch wrote, "was always for a faith that would cover my whole life. . . . And then the idea of the kingdom of God offered itself as the real solution for that problem. Here was a religious conception that embraced it all. Here was something so big that absolutely nothing that interested me was excluded from it."⁵ In 1897, after eleven years of active life in a pastorate among the poor, Rauschenbusch returned to Rochester Theological Seminary, first as a professor of German and then of church history. With the publication of *Christianity and the Social Crisis* in 1907, he became one of the leaders of the social-gospel movement right up until his early death from cancer in 1918.

II

It would be impossible to do justice to the thought of both or even one of these men in a short space. And although both offer a theology of the social gospel and thus a coherent rationale for the Church's mission to society, they are also very different personalities with significantly different theologies. My intention here is simply to give a synopsis of their vision of the Church in its relation to society. This can be done, I think, by looking at four aspects of their thought. (1) I will consider characteristic features of their anthropology. (2) I will outline some of the fundamental principles of their method in theology. (3) A look at their focus on Jesus and Jesus' teaching of the kingdom of God will illustrate their theological grounding for the social gospel and for the mission of the Church to society. (4) I shall describe how each envisioned the role and function of the Church. While this schema does not represent in any way the historical development of their thought, I hope it will not distort their positions on the particular issues treated.⁶

⁵ Walter Rauschenbusch, "The Kingdom of God," *Cleveland's Young Men* 27 (Jan. 9, 1913), cited from Robert T. Handy, *The Social Gospel in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Oxford University, 1966) 266-67. For an account of the life of Rauschenbusch, cf. Dores Robinson Sharpe, *Walter Rauschenbusch* (New York: Macmillan, 1942). A complete bibliography of his works is provided by Max L. Stackhouse in Walter Rauschenbusch, *The Righteousness of the Kingdom*, ed. and intro. by Max L. Stackhouse (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968).

⁶ This danger is more acute in the case of Mathews than of Rauschenbusch, whose explicitly theological argument is for the most part summarized in one main work: Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1918). Mathews, on the other hand, had a long period of development as a theologian. Although there is continuity within this development, Mathews' thought also underwent significant shifts and changes of emphasis.

I begin with the anthropology that formed a basis for the thought of each of these thinkers. At least three anthropological factors influenced the theology of Mathews. First, in Mathews' view human existence is primarily spirit or spiritual. He assumed an evolutionary perspective and saw in specifically human existence the beginning of the triumph of the spiritual over material and naturally determined modes of existence. The thrust of spirit in the world is towards ever greater transcendence.⁷

Second, religion appealed precisely to this spiritual dimension of human beings. The dynamism of the spiritual aspect of human existence moves towards transcending mere nature and the limitations of finitude. Thus religion has an anthropological basis, and the role or function of religion is precisely to nurture the spiritual dimension of humanity and to draw human freedom beyond the atavistic tendency to lapse back into the condition of mere nature.

Third, in his appeal for the social gospel Mathews was fully aware that the Christianity of his day was individualistic; to overcome this, he redefined the person. Human beings are not merely individuals but are individuals-in-society. From his study of sociology and the influence of his early mentor Albion Small, Mathews became aware of the social dimension of human existence. Society is an organism, and individual human beings are not isolated atoms but parts of a common social existence. Thus Mathews did not surrender completely the fundamental conception of the individual as autonomous, but he severely modified it: the individual is a social individual. This means that each person participates in social groups, has responsibility for social arrangements, and is in turn shaped by the institutions in which he or she exists. The spirituality of each individual, therefore, cannot not be social, and the power of religion cannot fail to flow out into society.⁸

Rauschenbusch's anthropology, though not as fully developed as that of Mathews, adds a decisive dimension which the latter did not fully perceive. Rauschenbusch had a firm grasp of the objective and semiautonomous character of the social dimension of human existence.⁹ The social institutions which human beings fashion and in which they participate take on, as it were, a life of their own. They are objective relative to each individual, forming an external condition or sphere into which

⁷ Shailer Mathews, *The Gospel and the Modern Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1907) 216-19.

⁸ This theme of the relation of the individual to society and the influence of society on the individual is a constant theme in Mathews; cf. in particular Shailer Mathews, *The Individual and the Social Gospel* (New York: Missionary Education Movement, 1914) 1-21.

⁹ This insight was present in American sociology and in social-gospel literature, as can be seen in Edward A. Ross, *Sin and Society: An Analysis of Latter-Day Iniquity* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1907); see esp. chap. 5, "Sinning by Syndicate" 103-31.

each is socialized. The semiautonomous character of social structures flows from this objectivity; they are not easily changed. Rather, distinct from the will and freedom of individuals taken together as an aggregate, social structures have a function and finality that absorb individual freedom and channel it according to their own logic.

Thus, when Rauschenbusch comes to describe human sin, he is able to penetrate deeper into its power than Mathews. For Mathews sin is selfishness. Sin is real in Mathews; it is the tendency to lapse backward against the evolutionary process into nature and the material. It is a resistance to the immanent power of God in the evolutionary process which enables freedom to love and even urges self-sacrificial love.¹⁰ But one does not sense in Mathews the seriousness of sin in the same degree as in Rauschenbusch. Rauschenbusch for his part is clear that he does not want to minimize the power of sin in each individual person. But given his insight into the social dimension of human existence, he is able to describe superpersonal sin, a kingdom of Evil that is located within the institutions and social structures that shape human existence itself. Rauschenbusch did not have a "radical" doctrine of sin such as is found in Augustine, Luther, or Calvin. But he describes the human condition as truly in bondage, both personally and corporately, to forces that impel and carry us in the direction of injuring our fellow human beings. Sin is not simply against God and not simply subjective; sin is objective injury of others.¹¹

In sum, both theologians had an anthropology that included an understanding of the social dimension of human existence. Both had a doctrine of sin. Rauschenbusch was more advanced in each of these areas, especially in grasping the objective quality of the social dimension of human existence. But both had made the shift that is crucial for opening up a social interpretation of the meaning and relevance of the Christian message.

I pass now to the question of their method, to show the logic by which they arrive at their conclusions. Generally the theology of the social gospel may be considered an extension of the liberal theology of 19th-century Europe. By that I merely wish to assert the following characteristics. The theology of the social gospel was historically conscious; both Mathews and Rauschenbusch were historians. The intention of this theology is to reinterpret the Christian message in terms comprehensible and relevant to contemporary culture and society. Both Mathews and

¹⁰ Mathews, *The Gospel and the Modern Man* 161-84; Shailer Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism* (New York: Macmillan, 1924) 94-101. Mathews too had a theology of social sin that was borne by social institutions and influenced individuals by contagion.

¹¹ Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* 31-94; page references are to the Nashville: Abingdon, 1945 ed.

Rauschenbusch were evangelical theologians; they looked to the New Testament as the source of their theology. Like other liberal theologians, they distrusted objective metaphysical accounts of the meaning of Christian doctrine and tried to bind intrinsically together the religious and the moral elements of the Christian message in a nonreductionistic way that leads to an empowerment for Christian life in the world.

The theological method of Mathews, at least in his early attempts to give a coherent account of the social gospel, can be called a hermeneutical method of correlation.¹² It rests first on a distinction between content and form in the Christian gospel. The message of the New Testament is expressed within the context, worldview, and language forms of an ancient culture. The task of interpreting that message for today's culture involves identifying and distinguishing both the substance of the message and its culturally determined thought-forms, finding functionally equivalent thought-forms in today's worldview, and re-expressing the message in a way comprehensible to current culture and the religious problems that face it. But this task is not as simple as it seems, because, as Mathews recognized, the distinction between expressive form and content

¹² This phrase, "a hermeneutical method of correlation," is not Mathews' own and is somewhat anachronistic. It is drawn from current theological language and represents an interpretation of what was going on implicitly in Mathews' thinking. Mathews is much better known for employing a social-historical method in theology, and a full appreciation of his work and his contribution to theology will inevitably fix on this as a kind of center for understanding his thought. For accounts of Mathews' social-historical method, cf. Edwin E. Aubrey, "Theology and the Social Process," in *The Process of Religion: Essays in Honor of Dean Shailer Mathews*, ed. Miles H. Krumbine (New York: Macmillan, 1933) 17-52; Kenneth Cauthen, "The Life and Thought of Shailer Mathews," in Shailer Mathews, *Jesus on Social Institutions*, ed. Kenneth Cauthen (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) xiii-lxxiii; Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "American Culture and Modernism: Shailer Mathews's Interpretation of American Christianity," in *America in Theological Perspective*, ed. Thomas M. McFadden (New York: Seabury, 1976) 163-86. This social-historical method began to take explicit control of Mathews' thinking after 1910 and came to full flower especially in two of his works: *The Atonement and the Social Process* (New York: Macmillan, 1930) and *The Growth of the Idea of God* (New York: Macmillan, 1931). The account of Mathews' method here in terms of correlation is a limited treatment and is drawn especially from his 1910 *The Gospel and the Modern Man* 63-90. He describes his shift away from a correlation between New Testament Christianity and the present in the following terms: "The chief weakness seems to me now to have been the neglect of the historical process which lies between New Testament times and our own day, and the unconscious assumption that Christianity was a body of truth rather than a religious social movement" (Shailer Mathews, "Theology as Group Belief," in *Contemporary American Theology: Theological Autobiographies*, ed. Vergilius Ferm, 2nd series [New York: Round Table, 1933] 169). But the method he describes in *The Gospel and the Modern Man* need not be seen as contradictory to his social-historical method. One could characterize his social-historical method as a method of correlation with society and culture as a continuous process through various epochs of the Church's existence.

is not neat. For example, an apocalyptic expectation of imminent catastrophe may be considered as a cultural linguistic form in which the significance of the Christ event is expressed in the New Testament. But the form itself may contain within it elements of substance that should not be cast aside. Thus Mathews displays considerable methodological nuance; he foreshadows Bultmann's program of demythologization insofar as the point is not to cast the myth aside but to interpret it precisely as an expressive thought-form.

Mathews' execution of this method follows this pattern: he contrasts a description of evangelical Christianity, the Christianity as it is found in the New Testament, and a descriptive characterization of modern culture.¹³ The contrast is both a problem and a challenge, for what is needed is to bring them together, to correlate them, to express the former in terms of the latter. And Mathews is quite explicit in terms of content on how the correlation is to be made. The general framework of the gospel he calls messianism, which under scrutiny is shown to consist of three elements or components: the absolute sovereignty of God, an eschatological and apocalyptic view of history, and a view of messianic salvation. In our period these three comprehensive notions should be replaced with a notion of God who is both transcendent and immanent to the world and historical process, an evolutionary view of history and indeed of the universe, and a view of salvation that preserves together both a social and an individual dimension.

Rauschenbusch was not a professional theologian; he was a church historian, social ethicist, and catalyst of the social-gospel movement. Yet his one essay in constructive theology, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, is something of a minor classic. In it he does not display the sophistication and methodological self-consciousness that characterized all of Mathews' work. Yet if one asks the reflective question of what is going on in Rauschenbusch's theology in hermeneutical terms, one can see a consistent and logical pattern at work.

The key to Rauschenbusch's theological method is found in such phrases as "conceiving Christian doctrine in social terms."¹⁴ The experience of social solidarity, he says, is a medium for a new religious experience, and that religious experience will react back on theology as

¹³ Mathews characterizes modernity in four ways: "The modern age is primarily scientific and controlled by the conception of process." "A second and closely akin characteristic of the modern world is its conception of God as immanent in this process rather than an extra-mundane monarch." "If possible an even more remarkable characteristic of our day is the growing sense of social solidarity." "And, finally, another characteristic of our modern world is its refusal to accept as the basis of truth authority or metaphysical deduction" (*The Gospel and the Modern Man* 36, 43, 48, 51).

¹⁴ Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* 8.

a new principle for interpretation.¹⁵ We shall see further on that the symbol of the kingdom of God is absolutely central to Rauschenbusch's understanding of the content of Christianity. But if his theology is viewed as an essay in hermeneutics, one can see a certain fusion of horizons that controls all of his interpretation. Jesus preached the kingdom of God. But this symbol is received by Rauschenbusch into a fundamental heuristic paradigm of a social understanding of human existence. In other words, the social-anthropological conception of human beings in solidarity is an all-encompassing framework of reinterpretation. To put it bluntly, the simple change of reference, from the individual or an individualist conception of human existence to a view of the social nature and structure of human existence, is responsible for a new and different understanding of all the doctrines. Perhaps presuming an audience which has not made this shift, Rauschenbusch explicitly states that this is not a question of subtracting from the traditional view of things, but of adding a further essential dimension.¹⁶ But it is also clear that his interpretation is thoroughgoing, i.e. it reinterprets and rearranges everything.

Summarizing the methods of these two men, both of them may be seen as hermeneutical theologians. Mathews had a much more developed sense of the care required in mediating the Christian message from its past history to our own time and culture. He was a more sophisticated exegete and his hermeneutical theory is well developed. But Rauschenbusch too worked in a methodical way. Although he did not fully develop the implicit logic of his interpretation in technical terms, his actual method is a consistent reinterpretation of the Christian message and its doctrine from an objective social-anthropological conception of human existence captured in the category of solidarity.

Shifting now from their method to the content of their theology, we might ask what the foundational principles of their constructive interpretations are. This will lead us naturally to a consideration of their view of the mission of the Church to American society.

At the center of the content of the theology of both stand the person and teaching of Jesus. By the person of Jesus I mean the earthly human being Jesus, his life, death, and resurrection. This focus does not preclude the affirmation of Jesus' divinity, and while it is not developed at length by these theologians, it may be argued that the theology of both of these men implicitly contains a "high Christology," i.e. a Christology that

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 21.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 11. Once again, the terms "hermeneutics," "fusion of horizons," and "heuristic paradigm" are not Rauschenbusch's but an interpretation of what he is actually doing methodologically.

affirms the divinity of Jesus. And although this wholistic focus on the person of Jesus includes Jesus' teaching, still there is also a tendency in each of these thinkers, in different ways, to concentrate on Jesus' teaching in order to bring it to bear on contemporary Christian thought and life.

On a more purely theological level, Mathews considers Jesus as the center, the source, and the continuing inspiration of Christian faith and the Church. Jesus Christ is the savior and Mathews interprets that salvation in a contemporary idiom as a salvation from evil, from sin, and from death. Jesus is savior by being a revelation of God, by embodying God, and making God present and known in the world. He is not simply an example or a moral teacher, but the revealer and thus the communicator of God to history. In each of its aspects salvation is understood in the progressive evolutionary terms of final triumph of the spiritual over the material and impersonal forces of sin and degeneracy culminating in eternal life.¹⁷

On a more ethical level, Mathews appeals to Jesus as the source for a Christian social ethics.¹⁸ Generally speaking, the whole social-gospel movement was aware that Jesus did not provide direct responses to the social dilemmas that faced American society at the turn of the century. But at the same time none were willing to say that the moral teachings of Jesus were simply irrelevant to contemporary social existence. The strategy of Mathews for reclaiming the relevance of Jesus to the modern social situation consisted in a distinction between Jesus' concrete, occasional, and often individually directed moral teachings on the one hand, and on the other hand the fundamental principles, or general moral attitudes, or the ideals that were either stated or were implicit in the concrete teachings. These latter can be considered permanent or universal and thus can operate as guidelines and norms for their adaptation to new situations. For example, axiomatic in Jesus' teachings were the imperative of love, even self-sacrificial love, of neighbor, the absolute value and dignity of each person, the brotherhood and sorority of human

¹⁷ Mathews, *The Gospel and the Modern Man* 91-238; Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism* 78-83, 123-68.

¹⁸ *The Social Teaching of Jesus* (1897) represents Mathews' first essay at recovering the teachings of Jesus that are relevant for the social order. Another very influential study from the same period along the same lines is Francis Greenwood Peabody, *Jesus Christ and the Social Question: An Examination of the Teaching of Jesus in Its Relation to Some of the Problems of Modern Social Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1900). Thirty years later Mathews rewrote the work and published it as *Jesus on Social Institutions* (New York: Macmillan, 1928). This later version shows the development of his social-historical method. In Shailer Mathews, *The Social Gospel* (Boston: Griffith and Rowland, 1910), one finds a brief, elementary, but rather comprehensive social ethics based on the teachings of Jesus.

beings. It is true that these do not convert easily into programs of social reform. But as negative norms Mathews was able to point out quite sharply social patterns of behavior that flagrantly violated these absolute principles.

For Rauschenbusch, Jesus is first the revelation of God and even the embodiment of God in history. Rauschenbusch too dealt with Jesus as savior in terms of atonement theory. He also saw Jesus as the source and beginning of the Christian movement in history; Jesus was the initiator of the kingdom of God in history.¹⁹ He too wrote a book on the social principles of Jesus.²⁰ But the overriding emphasis of Rauschenbusch's appeal to Jesus is to his teaching of the kingdom of God. It was mentioned at the outset that during his early ministry the whole of Christianity took on new integrative meaning when it was mediated through this symbol. This remained a constant in all his writing; the kingdom of God is the dead center for his interpretation of Christian faith.²¹

Insofar as theology is evangelical, the teaching of Jesus on the kingdom of God summarizes the whole content of Christianity; this doctrine is the social gospel. All other doctrines are to be correlated with it. In response to personal and superpersonal sin, the kingdom of God is the doctrine of salvation and it is social salvation. Even the doctrine of God is reinterpreted in the light of the kingdom of God; God is the ground of the solidarity and social unity of human beings. God is opposed to the kingdom of Evil and is on the side of the poor and those who suffer. Here one sees the fusion in Rauschenbusch's imagination of input from the New Testament and his social solidaristic anthropology. There is hardly a work in which Rauschenbusch does not refer to the kingdom of God; in all his books he devotes a section to it. If one charts the development of Rauschenbusch's treatment of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God, one will see that he seems to become increasingly aware of the difficulty in determining exegetically what exactly Jesus meant by the term. Yet

¹⁹ Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* 146-66, 240-79.

²⁰ Walter Rauschenbusch, *The Social Principles of Jesus* (New York: Association, 1916).

²¹ For his part, Mathews did not completely ignore Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God. Early on, in *The Social Teaching of Jesus*, he interpreted Jesus as meaning by the kingdom of God a this-worldly reality, viewed in social terms, that would grow organically in history and be reached progressively. He gradually became convinced, however, that this interpretation was historically inaccurate; Jesus' teaching was thoroughly eschatological. This is one of the main reasons why Mathews rewrote the book. (Cf. Mathews, *New Faith for Old* 120.) But as was said earlier in dealing with Mathews' method, he did not want to jettison the deeper religious dimension contained in this interventionist view of the kingdom. For a treatment of the development of Mathews' thought on the kingdom of God and eschatology, see William D. Lindsey, *Shailer Mathews' Lives of Jesus: The Search for an Adequate Theological Foundation for the Social Gospel* (Ph.D. thesis; Toronto: University of St. Michael's College, 1986).

there were certain elements of it that Rauschenbusch consistently asserted were part of Jesus' teaching.²²

The kingdom of God refers to life in this world. Even though the kingdom of God will not find its fulfilment in history but only in another world, the kingdom of God that Jesus preached refers to life in this world under the reign and will of God. The kingdom of God, however, is not a merely human construction; its source and the power that brings it about is God. Although the kingdom of God will never be realized in history, Rauschenbusch envisages the kingdom within a context of organic growth and a progressive development of human society and history. The point here is one of movement in the direction of an ideal goal that requires participation. The historical inspiration of the kingdom of God is Jesus, and its prophetic power comes from the Spirit. In terms of the Christian life, the main function of the symbol of the kingdom of God is its power to integrate and unify all dimensions of life. The doctrine of the historical kingdom of God invests all aspects of human life with religious significance, and the conventional separations and compartmentalizations of the religious and the profane, the relative temporal versus the absolute eternal, and so on, are overcome.

In sum, the theological foundations of the social gospel are Christological. Methodologically, this involves a return to the historical person of Jesus as the divine source and foundation of Christian faith. On this theological foundation both of these thinkers considered the teachings of Jesus, with Mathews stressing Jesus' religious and social-ethical ideals, attitudes, and principles, while Rauschenbusch focused his interpretation on Jesus' teaching of the kingdom of God.

In the light of these Christological foundations we can now move to the question of the Church, and specifically the mission of the Church in American society as the social gospelers viewed it in the early part of this century. I begin with the view of Mathews.

There is a sense in which the theology of Mathews is intrinsically ecclesiological. For Mathews, religion itself is to be approached from an anthropological and social-historical point of view. From this perspective religion is functional. The human phenomenon of religion itself has a purpose and a function in human life, i.e. to draw human existence forward in the evolutionary movement of reality towards a spiritual and transcendent goal. Religion is not primarily a matter of revealed truths and a set of beliefs; it is rather a set of attitudes that govern life. Thus

²² Successive implicitly hermeneutical treatments of the kingdom of God in Jesus' teaching by Rauschenbusch are the following: *The Righteousness of the Kingdom* 79-116; *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907) 44-92; *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1912) 48-68; *A Theology for the Social Gospel* 131-45.

Mathews understands Christianity existentially and historically as being the very basis of human living. Moreover, religion and especially Christianity are radically social in their most fundamental conceptions. Religion generally binds people together in society under God, and Christianity in particular, with its view of all being brothers and sisters in a unified condition in relation to God, is fundamentally social. Since all religion is a historical phenomenon, it becomes organized in some institutional form. Christianity is no exception; it is a historical religion and in its institutional form it is called the Church.²³

Mathews rarely dwells on the nature of the whole Church as a unified institutional entity. He defines the term simply as the organization of Christianity.²⁴ In fact, he was somewhat suspicious of the term "the church" as a unified substantive category since it tends toward being an abstraction. His own thinking was denominational; he defended the right and the need for a pluralism of denominations, not in competition with each other, but under the co-operative umbrella of the historical dynamism of Christianity itself. For him the term "church" referred to the churches either in the sense of the congregation or any other more encompassing and unifying organizational form.

The function or mission of the Church to society, according to Mathews, is specifically religious and spiritual. The Church is essentially a religious organization.²⁵ He is even critical of liberal theology insofar as it tends to reduce Christianity and the Church to an ethical or moral plane.²⁶ The basic function of the Church is religious; and in that it is distinct from all other social institutions. The Church should never compromise its religious essence or be confused with other institutions. It is not meant to replace other social institutions with their specific goals. The Church is not the government, not the school system, not primarily an agency for relief work, not an institution to provide entertainment. The Church should not identify itself with any program of

²³ Cf. Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism* 54-78; "Theology as Group Belief" passim; Mathews, *Christianity and Social Process* (New York: Harper, 1934) 57-97. This should not be read in reductionist terms; the point is not to reduce Christian belief to a noncognitive and purely functional vitalistic movement of the moral life. It simply affirms the bearing of all religion, and Christianity as well, on human life as a whole.

²⁴ Shailer Mathews, *The Church and the Changing Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1907) 3; *The Gospel and the Modern Man* 310. For a much fuller definition of the Church in terms of his social-historical method, see his *The Church and the Christian* (New York: Macmillan, 1938) 1-53.

²⁵ Shailer Mathews, *Scientific Management in the Churches* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1912) 14-21.

²⁶ Mathews, *New Faith for Old* 148-49.

political or social reform, nor by extension with any political party.²⁷ The carrying out of reforms in society is for church members, not for the churches as such. To align the Church with an ideology, such as socialism for example, would be to tend to reduce human existence to a function of economic forces. Human beings are spiritual and the Church is religious, but it has a social mission and a social role precisely in being spiritual and religious. The Church is defined functionally precisely as an agency that fosters the deeper religious grounds of social life. Its gospel is precisely a social gospel.

The religious or spiritual sphere can never be separated from the ethical and moral sphere in Mathews' thought. Thus the fundamental function of the Church in history can almost be reduced to a single formula in Mathews' thought: the mission of the Church is to socialize the faith, the values, the ideals of Jesus continuously in history.²⁸ The Church as an organization is a mediator; it is the place where people find God in history today as God is revealed in Jesus.²⁹ The Church is itself the socialized or organized form of Christian faith and Christian life. Thus the Church may be considered as the extension in history of the person and message of Jesus. In short, once the Church is viewed historically and functionally, it cannot not have a mission to the society and culture in which it exists. The mission of the Church to history is the very *raison d'être* of religion generally and of Christianity specifically.

More particularly, how should the Church carry out its mission of socializing the ideals and values of Jesus? Mathews addressed this question directly or indirectly throughout the whole course of his career, and it is impossible to summarize adequately his prescriptions for church practice in the various contexts in which they are put forward. But a division between how the Church forms its own members and its public face in society will enable one to see the basic thrust of his thought. Thus

²⁷ Mathews, *The Church and the Changing Order* 242. "In our new zeal to make the church of social significance, there is real danger lest we translate too freely its religious function into philanthropy and reform." "It cannot be too often emphasized that a church is not primarily a philanthropic or an ameliorative institution." Rather "the function of the church is pre-eminently that of ministration to people's spiritual needs" (*Scientific Management in the Churches* 20-21).

²⁸ "The chief end of the activity of the church is not to get people into its fold, but to get itself into society; to get its ideals into the reconstructive forces of society itself." "In the same proportion that the church is conceived of as functional rather than as an end in itself will this become an end in view" (Mathews, *Scientific Management in the Churches* 49; cf. also his *The Gospel and the Modern Man* 311; *Christianity and Social Process* 30-32, 98, 215-18).

²⁹ Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism* 150-51; *The Church and the Christian* 145-46.

I shall outline first the task of the Church relative to its own members, and second its mission to society, and then compare this to the thought of Rauschenbusch.

To begin, the mission of the Church is to form its own members, to socialize the values of Jesus within itself as a communion of people who are also the participants in society. The Church should change society by changing individuals. This is a fundamental principle in Mathews governing his vision of the relation of the Church to society; it should primarily focus its attention on individuals, to fashion their social consciousness and thus prepare a vanguard, the vicarious tenth of society, that will be the leaders of social reform.³⁰

The task of the Church within itself is to equip itself to deal with the world as it is. This demands changes. The Church's spirituality has to change from one that separates Christian values off from everyday social, political, and economic life, to one that sees the spiritual value of everyday life itself. It requires a change in theology, away from the speculative study of doctrines to the practical implications of the gospel message for concrete living. Without careful attention to modern scholarship, to modern science in all its forms, the Church will cut itself off from the progressive and formative influences that inevitably fashion the future of society. A change is needed in the concept of leadership and ministry in the Church, away from traditional and pious persons to modern, progressive, and aggressive types, who are intellectually equipped and who are movers, practitioners, and organizers. The whole point of ministry is to lead the Church in its involvement with life with a particular emphasis on the social dimensions of life. Mathews had great confidence in a revised and modernized program for the training of ministers that was being implemented at the University of Chicago. Ministers should receive a scientifically critical and practical education designed functionally to meet the needs of their work. It should include the study of society and practical internships.³¹

In general, Mathews had great hope for the power and efficacy of education as a source for future reforms in society. He stressed not only the education of ministers but also the efficacy of the Sunday School. One of the Church's main tasks is to form young people who will in turn be leaders with a Christian social consciousness and thus help transform society. In sum, the Church is not in the business of designing programs of social reform. Rather, the role of the Church in transforming society is "by the education and conversion of individual lives."³² On the pro-

³⁰ Mathews, *The Church and the Changing Order* 100-101, 140-42, 171-72, 177.

³¹ Mathews expresses his views on ministerial education in *The Church and the Changing Order* 230-41; *Scientific Management in the Churches* 34-48; *New Faith for Old* 255-74.

³² Mathews, *The Church and the Changing Order* 172.

grammatic level, then, the mission and strategy of the Church should begin within the Church itself; it proceeds by changing individuals, and then through them it helps to fashion public opinion, and then this public opinion should be reinforced with legislation.³³

Second, the Church as organized Christianity is a social entity with a public visage. Its mission is the socialize the religious and spiritual ideals of Jesus in history. Its gospel is a social gospel, and for Mathews this involves a comprehensive social ethics. The mission of the Church, then, transcends the shaping of individuals within itself but for society; on another level the Church as a social organization has a mission to other social institutions.³⁴

On this level Mathews sees the Church as the public conscience of society. Its mission is to help in the change and reform of society where it is destructive of human life. "The social significance of a belief in a God who is opposed to conditions and institutions tending to promote injury is inestimable."³⁵ "Whatever is injurious to human life is contrary to the ideals of Jesus, and if it cannot be ameliorated it must be destroyed."³⁶ "The call which the social gospel makes upon the followers of Christ is not merely to enjoy a future salvation, but to join with him in opposing institutionalized evil and in destroying whatever in our modern world is contrary to the ideals which he set forth."³⁷

But this mission is not merely negative; it is also positive. The mission is to transform society and to Christianize it, to inject Christian values into social institutions as such.

In too many quarters the conception of salvation is still that of individual rescue, and the social ideals set forth by Christian preaching are those which accept the social status quo and endeavor to cure its victims. The really dynamic conception of Christianity, both within the church and without, has passed beyond this stage. It realizes that there are forces in our civilization that must be evangelized. It was inevitable, therefore, that there should grow up a new conception of evangelization, which should not be only the preaching of the gospel to individuals but also the institutionalizing of the gospel in the various reconstructive forces in our social order.³⁸

Passing now to the mission of the Church according to Rauschenbusch, one finds significant differences within a basic similarity of context and goal. His view of the mission of the Church is similar to that of Mathews,

³³ Mathews, *The Social Gospel* 132.

³⁴ "Attitudes of the social mind must be treated from their own point of view. . . . Social evils must be remedied socially" (Mathews, *The Church and the Changing Order* 138).

³⁵ Mathews, *The Individual and the Social Gospel* 75.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 73.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 77.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 72.

since he too sees the Church both substantively and functionally. Substantively the Church is the community that embodies in itself the salvation revealed and mediated to history by Jesus. But more importantly its function is to be a medium in the history of social salvation, a salvation that is also both individual and personal, but which extends beyond that to the dimension of human existence objectified in social institutions.³⁹ In short, the Church is the medium in history for the kingdom of God in response to the kingdom of Evil.

The differences between Mathews and Rauschenbusch are quite pointed when it comes to the analysis of society. Rauschenbusch had a much more thoroughgoing class analysis of society than Mathews. And this included a stinging critique of the capitalism of his day and a clear option for socialism.⁴⁰ Although he did not join the socialist party and did not advocate all socialist programs, and certainly not the hostility to religion that frequently appeared within the movement, he considered socialist values more congruent with those of Christianity and the theoretical system as the only hope for Western culture. Beyond this, as was said earlier, Rauschenbusch had a much keener sense for the objectivity of social structures than did Mathews. And his analyses of society were more penetrating, deeper, more detailed, and more expert.

These differences lead me to reverse the order in the presentation of the aspects of the mission of the Church to society. Mathews began with the individual, which, as a social individual, always led him into the social sphere. In Rauschenbusch, however, the commanding perspective is social solidarity, but one that also prized personal autonomy and religious piety. It is more appropriate to Rauschenbusch to see the demands of the objective social situation as that to which the Church must adjust its mission.

First, regarding the public mission of the Church as an institution vis-à-vis society and culture, Rauschenbusch called for some radical decisions. His analysis of Western history led him to believe that Western culture as such had arrived at a critical turning point which involved its very survival. The great amassing of wealth in the wake of the industrial revolution had created the existence of distinct classes that were in conflict, actual in Europe, potential and imminent in the United States. If the working classes and the poor were not accommodated, the ensuing social disruption could spell the downfall of a civilization. As far as the Church was concerned, what was at stake in the conflict was the Church itself. In his view, the values of capitalism, the aggressive individualism,

³⁹ Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* 118–30.

⁴⁰ These are contained chiefly in *Christianity and the Social Crisis* of 1907 and *Christianizing the Social Order* of 1912.

competition, and greed that are intrinsic to the system and into which people are socialized, are in simple contradiction to the values of the kingdom of God, Jesus' teachings generally, and Christianity itself. If capitalism in its present mode continued to increase, the Church would continue to decrease.⁴¹

In a rather ironical argument, and acknowledged as such, Rauschenbusch appealed to the Church's selfish interest. The premise of the argument is that the Church, as a social institution, bears a symbiotic relationship to society in general. Therefore, at every point where there is a social crisis, wherever there is a sickness in society, the Church will suffer a parallel symptom. For example, the Church in a poor urban environment cannot be a religious institution in any narrowly conceived sense; in fact, it must become a center of relief work. Thus, in this curious appeal to a conservative and narrowly conceived religious conception of the Church, Rauschenbusch shows that for its own survival this Church must address the social crisis.⁴²

For Rauschenbusch, given his social analysis, if the Church is to perform its mission to society, it must join forces with the working classes. His solution is a clear choice, one that in his day was an analogue to today's option for the poor. The Church must align itself with those values and forces in society that were on the side of the poor, the working classes, and the unemployed.

Second, what should the Church do within itself to accomplish its mission? First and foremost, Rauschenbusch calls for a shift in the spirituality of the Church. He calls for a spirituality of the kingdom of God that invests life in the world and engagement in the social order with religious significance.⁴³ He calls for the use of the pulpit to address social issues in a religious way.⁴⁴ He calls upon ministers, who generally are drawn from more affluent families, to identify with the working classes and to be bridge figures or mediators between sectors of society.⁴⁵ In sum, he calls for those measures of change within the Church that will make it an effective medium of the kingdom of God within society.

Let me summarize here the views of the mission of the Church to society of these two theologians. Mathews combines a resolutely historical and functional view of the Church that has a mission to society with an anthropology that ultimately focuses on the individual. But this individual is a social individual, so that these two dimensions are always

⁴¹ Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* 332-42, 388-411; *Christianizing the Social Order* 311-23.

⁴² Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* 287-342.

⁴³ Rauschenbusch, *The Righteousness of the Kingdom* 110-16.

⁴⁴ Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* 357-69.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 368.

in tension in his thought. Thus the foundational formula for Mathews is that the Church is an organized form of Christian faith whose mission is religious and spiritual. It is a mission to fashion members whose religious life is lived in the social sphere and whose whole aim is to socialize Christian values in social institutions. Rauschenbusch's significantly different focus in his anthropology leads him to stress the public role of the Church and the necessity to make a corporate and public decision for the poor and oppressed in society. These two positions complement each other.

III

Having presented the social gospel's theology of the mission of the Church to American society as represented by its two leading theologians, I conclude by offering some constructive reflections about the possibility of retrieving the value of this theology for today's Church. These will be no more than programmatic remarks and they are intended merely as suggestive of a possible direction in which theological reflection may go. As a preface to them, I wish to clarify what I mean by retrieval.

It is important to realize that the movement that bore the theology of the social gospel is over and that the theology of the social gospel cannot be repeated. Sidney Ahlstrom is correct, I think, when he says that the social-gospel movement was dependent on a very specific set of circumstances in American history and was carried by a general spirit of reform peculiar to the age.⁴⁶ After the Great War and in the decade that followed, the mood of the country changed in such a way that the appeal of the social-gospel movement failed to sound convincing. Reading the social-gospel literature, one senses on the surface that it is dated; everything appears too simple within the horizon of our consciousness of the enormous complexity of American and world society. Often the social gospels appear to be addressing a Christian nation, or even a Protestant nation, whereas today our sense of pluralism is more acute. Often the horizon of the social gospels was a self-contained nation, whereas American political economy today can scarcely be contained by the borders of the United States. A Roman Catholic should also be sensitive to the different connotations of the term "church" when used in a tradition with a congregational polity.

Moreover, the theology of the social gospel has been rather severely criticized at a number of crucial points, and these criticisms must be taken into account. Generally, this theology was too optimistic in its metaphysical view of reality and its conception of the possibilities for human history and society. The controlling ideology of human progress

⁴⁶ Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* 786.

without fear of catastrophic reversal, the naive sense of learning and education as a medium of virtue, and the sheer enthusiasm of the language are often judged simply wrong. Perhaps the most serious problem with this theology from the viewpoint of Christian symbol and experience is the lack of a radical doctrine of sin. These criticisms, it should be noted, do not apply to all of the social gospelers evenly, for they differed among themselves. But as a characterization of the movement and its theology, they help account for the reaction that set in.

But while the criticisms of the social-gospel movement and more generally of liberal theology are serious and call for severe modification of conception and language, I do not believe that they are mortal relative to the fundamental intention of the theology of the social gospel. The principles for a retrieval that follow, then, are an attempt to accept the standard critiques of this theology, but to reassert the Christian values found in it by bringing to bear on it and correlating with it some themes of current reflection principally but not exclusively from Roman Catholic theology.

First, the attempt of the theology of the social gospel to depict a social anthropology is sound. Theology today is once again beginning to transcend individualist existential anthropology. To understand human existence, and ironically even to understand the individual, one must use the critical sociological tools that the social sciences are providing. Mathews' concept of the social individual and Rauschenbusch's concept of solidarity are not antithetical, but may be and are being joined to fashion a historically conscious anthropology. This correlation is absolutely fundamental and it carries with it, even as it did in the theology of the social gospel, a shift of consciousness, method, and content that pervades the whole of theology.

Second, one can distinguish between the rhetoric of the social gospel and the structure of the argument that lies beneath. And one may associate with this rhetoric the ideas and conceptions that were part of 19th-century intellectual culture but now seem unrealistic. Of the two men considered here, Mathews had the more self-conscious and developed view of theological method, but his delineation of early-20th-century American intellectual culture now seems in many respects foreign. Yet his method itself, the structure of it, is not entirely unsound. In fact, his method of correlation represents a sophisticated hermeneutical theory. Rauschenbusch, for his part, lacked an explicitly developed hermeneutical theory. And yet a careful examination of what he is doing can be re-expressed today in the light of developed theories of theology as hermeneutics. In many ways the logic of the method of Rauschenbusch is being employed today by some liberation and political theologians.

Third, one merely has to note that the Jesus of history has been restored to foundational position in Christian theology. Theology today is more modest about what it says of Jesus. But in the degree that historical consciousness begins to sink deeper into Christian theological imagination, the more that imagination must allow the earthly figure of Jesus, not independently of the New Testament construal of him, to disclose who God is and what God's will for us is. In their return to Jesus, the social gospellers were more or less dependent on the biblical scholarship of their period, and any given interpretation of Jesus may be more or less accurate.⁴⁷ But they join an ever-increasing consensus today that this return to Jesus is necessary. A more sophisticated hermeneutical theory may retrieve from Jesus and the New Testament the same values as espoused by Mathews and Rauschenbusch.

Fourth, although the ecclesiology of the social-gospel movement generally lacked the substantive view of the Church that would make it acceptable to "high church" communions, still the move to a historical and functional understanding of the Church correlates with movements within this discipline even in these traditions. It would simply be an error to see these two points of view as mutually exclusive. Once again, historical consciousness is leading in the direction of a historical ecclesiology, which involves a methodological imperative that the Church be seen in some measure as a function of society.⁴⁸ In the Roman Catholic Church, e.g., since the Second Vatican Council there has been a decisive turn towards a concern for responding to the question of the mission, role, and function of the Church in the modern world. In the American Church the last two social pastorals of the bishops, *The Challenge of Peace* and *Economic Justice for All*, demonstrate a consciousness that the Church must transcend ecclesiological privatism and assume some role in the civic and public life of the nation.

Fifth, the option for the working class and the unemployed displayed in Rauschenbusch has been paralleled in our day by an option for the poor in the economic sphere and an option for the oppressed in other social and cultural spheres. The option for the poor is not a historical accident. The social gospellers show that this priority of attention in the

⁴⁷ Historical study, especially of Mathews, will reveal that he was far more aware of contemporary European biblical scholarship than is usually attributed to him or the theology of the social gospel generally; cf. Lindsey, *Shailer Mathews' Lives of Jesus* passim.

⁴⁸ This historical perspective is found in such works as Bernard Cooke, *Ministry to Word and Sacrament: History and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); Edward Schillebeeckx, *Ministry: Leadership in the Community of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1981); idem, *The Church with a Human Face: A New and Expanded Theology of Ministry* (New York: Crossroad, 1985). Cf. also Roger Haight, "Historical Ecclesiology: An Essay on Method in the Study of the Church," *Science et esprit* 39 (1987) 27-46, 345-74.

Church's mission for oppressed peoples rests on a spontaneous Christian instinct. The reason why it has re-emerged in our time lies in the constancy of the gospel and analogous conditions that characterize our local and world society. This instinct of preference does not in its first moment call for a competitive rivalry that tries to determine who may be the most dehumanized. The interconnectedness of various forms of discrimination is well known. The preferential option for the dispossessed, against sexism, in support of marginalized minorities, against racism, should be the bias of all Christians. The religious motivation for this lies simply in a relation to God, as God is known through the revelation that occurs in the historical event of Jesus Christ.

Sixth, the theology of the social gospel rests on a supposition that is commonly shared today: Christian spirituality must include a dimension of concern for and engagement in life in the world. The axiom of the theology of the social gospel that embodied this concern was its insistence on the unity between the religious and the social ethical or moral spheres. Looking back, that formula often causes suspicion because of its association with liberal theology; no one is quite satisfied that in any given thinker the real tension and balance between the two dimensions, or an integration without loss on either side, was adequately maintained. But integration there must be, and a theology of the Church or an ecclesial policy or spirituality that does not empower its members for life in the world can be counted at best inadequate, at worst inauthentic.

In conclusion, this essay has not defined what the mission of the Church to American society and culture is. But it may have shown, with the help of the theology of the social gospel, that the ongoing formulation and effort at implementation of such a mission is essential to the life of the Church. Although such a conclusion may seem elementary, it is not altogether clear that it is shared by masses of churchgoers who are the Church. It seems to me that the theology of the social gospel was correct in its view of the fundamental rationale for such a mission. The mission of Jesus Christ in the world was one that exerted spiritual and moral power from God for human life in the world and for history. And the mission of the Church is to continue the mission of Jesus. In a pluralistic society, that spiritual power cannot and should not be exerted fanatically. It must be mediated and chastened by the social analysis, reasoned argument, and public language exemplified by the Catholic bishops in their recent pastorals. But an even greater responsibility and imperative on the leadership of the Church is to turn this discussion back into the churches in such a way that the religious and spiritual dimensions of this mission can empower Christian discipleship.