

# *A Response by an Evangelical*

*Tony Campolo*

As I reread this Christian classic, I was both thrilled and troubled by what Walter Rauschenbusch had to tell us. Of overwhelming importance to all Christians is his clear declaration that the central message of Jesus concerned the kingdom of God as a socio-historical reality. For Rauschenbusch, the gospel Jesus proclaimed was all about the realization in this world of the kingdom of God—a kingdom marked by economic justice; an end to the racist, sexist, and ethnic prejudices and discriminatory practices of our present age; and glimpses of an emerging new humanity.

Rauschenbusch offers us a clear and pronounced alternative to any attempt to place the kingdom of God solely in another world after this life is over. Understanding Jesus as a prophet in the tradition of Amos and Isaiah, Rauschenbusch makes a clear case that Jesus was committed to the transformation of this present world into a new societal system in which God's will would be done on earth even as it is done in heaven.

It has taken Evangelicals like me far too long to come around to embracing Rauschenbusch's kind of holistic gospel that not only promises eternal life to individuals but also offers hope for dramatic positive changes in our present social order.

The way in which Rauschenbusch views the coming of God's kingdom on earth is of vital importance. He teaches that the kingdom will emerge in evolutionary fashion as Christians, imbued with the spirit of Christ, work together to make it happen. He rejects the belief that the evils of our present age will come to a sudden and climactic end through an apocalyptic intervention of God, as so many present-day

Evangelicals would contend. Fans of the famous *Left Behind* books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins would be very disturbed to learn that Rauschenbusch clearly does not believe that God's kingdom comes through a sudden eschatological event. Instead, he believes the kingdom of God comes on earth through a gradual process facilitated by people of God infused with the ethics and social vision of Christ. When godly people are mobilized into a movement that permeates all the institutions of society with the values of Christ, then, he contends, the gates of hell cannot prevail against it.

Rauschenbusch viewed Jesus in much the same way as did the Catholic theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Teilhard declared Jesus to be what he called "the Omega man." By that, he meant Jesus was an incarnation of the fully actualized human being that God wills for all of us to become. Jesus was the person who embodied the highest expressions of God's love and justice and, as such, was a full manifestation of a new kind of humanity that could create the kingdom of God. This man Jesus, whose personhood had eschatological dimensions, lived among us—and as we spiritually relate to him and surrender to his influence in our lives, we will be transformed into people through whom God's kingdom becomes a historical reality. Though Teilhard had a much stronger mystical dimension to his teachings, his thinking about the role of Jesus in bringing in the kingdom was similar to Rauschenbusch's teaching.

It is important to recognize that Rauschenbusch, though he embraced a Hebraic view of God's kingdom being in this world, rejected the belief that it would come about through a violent overthrow of the present socioeconomic order. While expressing great sympathies for a socialist vision in which all economic inequalities would be abolished, he totally rejected the kind of violence evident in the Bolshevik Revolution. He can better be understood as a precursor of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. He was a pacifist who rejected violence as an instrument for God's revolution.

Rauschenbusch considered John the Baptist to be the beginning of the Christian movement. He saw that Jesus, while connecting with John's vision for a new humanity in which there would be a redistribution of wealth, transcended the belief that the kingdom would come through God breaking into history with an abrupt cataclysmic judg-

ment on the present age. God would not bring in the kingdom, according to Rauschenbusch, through the violent overthrow of the present kingdoms of this world, but through organic, evolutionary development. As individuals "assimilated" the spirit of Christ and lived out his ethics, the kingdom of God would break loose in the world. As persons relinquished their individualism and embraced a community spirit that made them one, they would, according to Rauschenbusch, become a force for social change.

To say that Rauschenbusch had a big impact on Christian thinking would be an understatement. His call for Christians to become instruments of God working to change our world into one that embodies the ethical values of the kingdom of God is an essential part of our thinking today. It is hard to imagine that Christians ever thought otherwise. Yet, in the not too distant past, a good part of American Christendom posited God's kingdom as belonging only to another world. Some of us Evangelicals still hold to this belief, but most share Rauschenbusch's view that we are called to take up the challenge of bringing about social transformation. Furthermore, over the past few decades an increasing number of Evangelicals have come to believe, as Rauschenbusch did, that in our efforts to be kingdom builders, we must give priority to addressing the needs of the poor and oppressed. It is hard for most current Evangelicals to understand how our predecessors could have missed the more than two thousand biblical admonitions to seek justice and well-being for those whom Jesus called "the least of these."

While we may embrace much of Rauschenbusch's thinking, it is easy to understand why so many Evangelicals are troubled by the writings of this twentieth-century prophet. First and foremost, Evangelicals are concerned about his understanding of the personhood and work of Jesus. He does not clearly affirm the traditional church belief that Jesus was fully God incarnate. There is no doubt that Rauschenbusch affirms divine qualities in Jesus, but it is not at all clear that he views Christ as the second member of the Trinity.

Second, there is a sense in which Rauschenbusch fails to grasp the radical sinfulness of the human race. It would remain for Reinhold Niebuhr and others of later decades to raise the awareness that there is something desperately wrong with all of us, and that assimilating the spirit of Christ as some kind of transforming moral influence is not

enough to create the new humanity Rauschenbusch envisioned. I wish Rauschenbusch had asserted the need for personal conversion in which an individual enters into a dialogical and transforming relationship with a living Christ. We Evangelicals believe that what is needed is infinitely more than a noble ethic that is assimilated as we yield to the influence of Christ's teachings. Rather, we affirm the need for a miraculous transformation of who we are into what we should be, a transformation that comes as Christ himself invades our hearts and minds and souls—as mystical as that might sound. It may be that Rauschenbusch is deserving of the criticism of Reinhold Niebuhr's brother, Richard Niebuhr, who spoke out against those who would preach a gospel in which "a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."

We Evangelicals also have trouble with Rauschenbusch's view of Scripture. As he developed his understanding of the ethics of Jesus, Rauschenbusch used Scripture very much in accord with the teachings of biblical scholars of his day, who understood the Bible as being powerfully conditioned by the political circumstances of the writers. Since we Evangelicals view the Bible as inspired by the Holy Spirit, we are less willing to accept the overriding influence of such external forces. We accept the established canon of the Bible and believe the Holy Spirit was at work in the authors of Scripture, guiding them as they wrote so as to give us an infallible guide for faith and practice. Therefore, we cannot accept Rauschenbusch's belief that parts of the Bible need not be taken seriously since they are more reflections of the political pressures under which they were written than revelations from God.

Finally, I do not believe there is necessarily a contradiction between Rauschenbusch's idea that the kingdom of God emerges as individuals come together to form a movement through which God effects change and the traditional evangelical belief that God intervenes at the eschaton, bringing history to a dramatic and apocalyptic end. Personally, I believe both are true. I contend that to be Christian is to surrender to the leading of Christ to work for social justice, but that we do so in the hope that one day Christ will physically return and bring to a trium-

phant conclusion the good work he initiated in us and is carrying out through us (Philippians 1:6).

It is easy to understand why Rauschenbusch thought the way he did concerning the organic, progressive evolution of society, ameliorated by godly people who sacrifice individual egoism for the collective good. Sociologists of the time, such as Lester Ward, had made this kind of thinking prevalent. The naive optimism that marked the early part of the twentieth century supported this way of looking at the future. Since those heady visionary days, we have been shaken back to the reality that demonic “principalities and powers” are at work in the world, increasing the kingdom of evil.

While Rauschenbusch saw the Church’s potential to provide the volunteers and financial resources for a positive social movement, he nevertheless failed to recognize its mystic nature as the living organism in which Christ is personally alive. You cannot help but sense that Rauschenbusch believed the Church had become a social institution bogged down by self-interests and that he questioned whether or not, with its rituals and legalisms, it really could become the moral force in history that God intended for it to be. That the kingdom will emerge in history was never doubted by Rauschenbusch, but I sense that he suspected God might build the kingdom via people outside the Church who espouse the moral influence of Jesus because the Church fails in its calling. We Evangelicals do not have such doubts and agree with the Scripture that it will be in and through the Church, in spite of its shortcomings, that all social institutions will become subject to God’s will (Ephesians 1:21–23). The bride of Christ will strive to create the kingdom of God here on earth, doing so in anticipation of the coming of our Bridegroom, who will complete the task. Maranatha!

# *Can These Dry Bones Live?*

*Cornel West*

Walter Rauschenbusch was the most influential and important religious public intellectual in early-twentieth-century America. His prophetic ministry as pastor for over a decade at Second German Baptist Church adjacent to the impoverished Hell's Kitchen section of Manhattan and his prophetic writings as professor of church history at Rochester Seminary in upstate New York best exemplify the Social Gospel movement—a historic movement that wedded the Christian faith to social justice during the Gilded Age (Mark Twain's phrase) of imperial extension, corporate greed, and massive immigration.

In this classic work now a century old, Rauschenbusch tries to lay bare the ways in which the spiritual power and moral forces of the Christian tradition could be mobilized to revive and renew the democratic possibilities of American society. In his powerful chapter 5, entitled "The Present Crisis," Rauschenbusch welcomes the coming of the twentieth century with a parabolic dialogue between the Spirits of the Dead Centuries sitting on granite thrones together. As the Spirit of the Nineteenth Century enters, the others are eager to hear the report—"Tell thy tale, Brother. Give us word of the humankind we left to thee." And we hear a self-congratulatory tale of economic growth, scientific breakthroughs, technological innovation, and the proliferation of democratic regimes. The Spirit of the First Century then speaks—"Your words sound as if the redemption of man had come at last. Has it come?"

Needless to say, if we now follow the descent of the Spirit of the Twentieth Century to the "vaulted chamber of the past" and listen to the words of the major figures of our day, do they sound any different?

We have reached the end of history. There is no alternative to corporate capitalism. The era of racism and sexism is over. Americans are never aggressive imperialists, only democratic missionaries. These self-celebratory forms of rhetoric hide and conceal the social misery that constitutes the present crisis. Rauschenbusch goes on in the chapter to examine the devouring of land by corporate elites, the stagnation and decline of wages as profits soar, the dip in the morale of workers as capital becomes more mobile, the health-care shortage for Americans, the escalating wealth inequality alongside the crumbling of political democracy, the tainting of the moral atmosphere, and the market-driven undermining of the family. Does not our present moment echo Rauschenbusch's "present crisis"? Do not our contemporary troubles rooted in a free-market fundamentalism that idolizes a market way of life, an aggressive militarism that exalts violence as a preeminent way of solving conflicts, and an escalating authoritarianism that slowly yet surely attenuates our rights and liberties in the name of national security resonate with Rauschenbusch's prescient words:

Nations do not die by wealth, but by injustice. . . . Progress slackens when a single class appropriates the social results of the common labor, fortifies its evil rights by unfair laws, throttles the masses by political centralization and suppression, and consumes in luxury what it has taken in covetousness. Then there is a gradual loss of productive energy, an increasing bitterness and distrust, a waning sense of duty and devotion to country, a paralysis of the moral springs of noble action.

For him, the function of prophetic religion in the present time is to promote a social awakening by means of concrete praxis—from personal prayer to political organization. This social awakening is predicated on regenerated personalities, on courageous and compassionate people who possess "a will which sets justice above policy and profit, and of an intellect emancipated from falsehood" (see chapter 7, "No Thoroughfare"). He argues that the future of American democracy—if not Western civilization—rests largely on the fighting energy of moral forces undergirded by prophetic religious vision. He states boldly, "It is either a revival of social religion or the deluge."

For those of us who critically—yet appreciatively—build on the precious legacy of Walter Rauschenbusch, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Herschel, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, and other prophetic religious giants, the present crisis is a terrifying one. Will the Religious Right along with conservative corporate elites and imperial politicians push us into an American-style neo-fascism in the name of “restoring morality,” “market productivity,” and the “war on terrorism”? Can an organized citizenry prevail over the chronic lying, massive spying, and green-lighted torturing in our day? Can we be awakened from the ubiquitous sleepwalking—a callous indifference to others’ suffering reinforced by well-paid conservative pundits, professors, politicians, and preachers?

Rauschenbusch felt our same urgency and wrestled with our own despair. And he responded with a deep sense of hope—a hope based on our commitment to justice for all, service to others, and a love that counters unlovely persons and circumstances.

In the last resort the only hope is in the moral forces which can be summoned to the rescue. If there are statesmen, prophets, and apostles who set truth and justice above selfish advancement; if their call finds a response in the great body of the people; if a new tide of religious faith and moral enthusiasm creates new standards of duty and a new capacity for self-sacrifice; if the strong learn to direct their love of power to the uplifting of the people and see the highest self-assertion in self-sacrifice—then the entrenchments of vested wrong will melt away; the stifled energy of the people will leap forward; the atrophied members of the social body will be filled with a fresh flow of blood; and a regenerate nation will look with the eyes of youth across the fields of the future.

The major lesson for us of Walter Rauschenbusch—the grandfather of my dear teacher and the towering philosopher Richard Rorty—is his profound commitment to moral maturity. He found this moral maturity most manifest in the life of Jesus—a life so shot through with love that “love with Jesus was not a flickering and wayward emotion, but the highest and most steadfast energy of a will bent on creating fellowship” (see chapter 2, “The kingdom of God and the ethics of

Jesus"). The very "tone of sadness in [Jesus's] later ministry" (chapter 2, "The purpose of Jesus: the kingdom of God") was due to the lack of moral maturity in his own people, community, nation, empire, and disciples. When it seemed as if all was lost, most had turned from him, and even close friends betrayed him; "unutterable sadness filled his soul, but he never abandoned his faith in the final triumph of that kingdom of God for which he had lived" (chapter 2, "The revolutionary consciousness of Jesus").

Like Antonio Gramsci in the face of fascism, Rauschenbusch counsels a robust willfulness in the face of corporate capitalism. Neither loses faith in the moral capacity of ordinary people to wake up and shake up the status quo. His optimism of the will against the grain of "tragic human life" is nurtured by "a revolutionary Christianity which will call the world evil and change it" (chapter 2, "The revolutionary consciousness of Jesus"). To be a Christian is to live dangerously, primarily owing to the narrow conformity of Constantinian Christendom, the powers of entrenched interest, and the comforting seductions of the idols of greed and bigotry. He writes:

Jesus foresaw that the Christian movement would work incidental harm and pain.... Our argument here is simply this, that Christianity must have had a strong social impetus to evoke such stirrings of social unrest and discontent. It was not purely religious, but also a democratic and social movement. Or, to state it far more truly: it was so strongly and truly religious that it was of necessity democratic and social also. (chapter 3, "The leaven of Christian democracy")

For too long Rauschenbusch has been cast as a naive liberal Christian thinker unacquainted with the dark side of life or a sentimental Christocentric Protestant unaware of the formidable obstacles to pursuing the kingdom of God on earth. We should not be deceived by these clichés often attributed to giants like Reinhold Niebuhr or Karl Barth. Instead, we must see that he—like them—believed that the riches of the Christian tradition can be brought to bear on the social misery, spiritual vacuity, and political hypocrisy of our day—and that our very future depends on this precious yet fallible effort.

# What to Do

Jim Wallis

In the one hundred years which have passed since the publication of Walter Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, much has changed and much has not. Upon reflection, a century later, this remarkable and milestone book helps us to understand both what to do and also what not to do in our twenty-first century.

When I first read the book, as an evangelical seminary student in the 1970s, I immediately appreciated his central theme: that Christian faith has a social ethic. In my own evangelical tradition, faith had been narrowly privatized and had an implicit conservative political ethic which resisted any impulse toward social justice. Then, just a few years later, that same tradition produced a very active but reactionary social ethic that focused on the moral issues of abortion and family values, while endorsing the wealth, power, and military policies of the American State. As a young evangelical, I was hungry for a Christian social ethic that focused on the poor, on social and racial equality, and on peace. Walter Rauschenbusch was a breath of fresh air.

Reading him again, on the occasion of the book's centennial edition, has been a very instructive experience. I again appreciated how directly and explicitly he saw the social ethics of Christianity. He asks what the "social ideal" of Christians ought to be and how we could be "mobilized for the progressive regeneration of social life." He calls for a society that might "enrich the many instead of the few" and speaks against the "mistakes" of many to "postpone social regeneration to a future era to be inaugurated by the return of Christ" as he reminds us that "God is now acting."

I still like his clarity in linking personal and social religion. "In personal religion," he says, "the first requirement is to repent and believe the gospel." But then, "social religion, too, demands repentance and faith: repentance for our social sins." Faith requires, he said, "a reevaluation of social values." He says there are "two great entities in human life—the human soul and the human race—and religion is to save both."

The Church's role, in Rauschenbusch's view, is "inspiring the social movement with religious faith and daring." But in the practicing of its social ethic, he warns, "it must not attempt to control and monopolize [that movement] for its own organization"—a critical counter to the kind of religion today that seeks political power and domination for its own agenda. He also insists that the exercise of Christian social conscience not be bound by partisan motivations and goals—also a needed corrective to the so-called Christian politics of some today.

The wholeness of the biblical vision and the depth of classical Christian orthodoxy come through when he says that "all human life can be filled with divine purpose; . . . God saves not only the soul, but the whole of human life." "The kingdom of God," he reminds us, "is not bounded by the Church, but includes all human relations." Yet his strategy is to exhort believers with a Christian social ethic ("salt and light") to infiltrate society, rather than make power grabs or seek political certainties. To move from Christian social ethics to easy political solutions was not his instruction, but rather, "it is safe to advise a man who feels 'the burden of the Lord' on social wrongs to go slowly and get adequate information"—again a needed corrective to the ideological Christian politics we have seen too much of in recent years.

He also cautions against the use of "personal invective" against individuals, so common in religious pronouncements in politics today. Rather he speaks of the "pressure of evil" that causes powerful leaders in society to act unjustly and notes that they, too, are the "victims of social forces."

I love how Christocentric Rauschenbusch is when he says, "Let others voice special interests; the minister of Jesus Christ must voice the mind of Jesus Christ." But if the Christian "really follows the mind of Christ, he will be likely to take the side of the poor in most issues. The poor are likely to be the wronged." He calls on pastors in particu-

lar not to worry about being charged with being "partial" to the poor, because "the daily press, public opinion, custom, literature, orthodox economic science, and nearly all the forces which shape thought, are on the side of things as they are." Be partial, and yet not "partisan" by following "the mind of a political party." These are all solid principles for social engagement today.

Rauschenbusch shows great insight into the limitations of the State to change social opinion and behavior and says the Church must change the "customs" that can prepare the way for real social change. It is his way of making the point that we often must change culture and public opinion before we can change politics, as shown by great practitioners of Christianity since then like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Rauschenbusch endorses the separation of Church and State, but cautions that their tasks are "not unrelated." Church and State do not live in "two airtight compartments" and together must both "serve what is greater than either: humanity."

In an era of rampant consumerism and almost continuous corporate scandal, Rauschenbusch's call sounds utterly contemporary: "The spiritual force of Christianity should be turned against the materialism and mammonism of our industrial and social order." In our own time, when even politics treats people as consumers more than citizens, his observation cuts right to the heart of the matter: "Man is treated as a *thing* to produce more things." As he uses the injunctions of the Sermon on the Mount ("life is more than food and raiment") to challenge his own society, ours today stands equally implicated: "Our industrial establishments are institutions for the creation of dividends, and not for the fostering of human life. In all our public life the question of profit is put first." In a populist critique, he asks how the economy of his day could be "organized in order to protect and foster the family, the human individual, and the Christian life"—a better family and spiritual values question than we often hear from some today. He even names the economy as "an oracle of the false god" and says that it is the "function of religion to teach society to value human life more than property, and to value property only insofar as it forms the material basis for the higher development of human life."

One hundred years later, theologians today, echoing Rauschenbusch's warnings, warn that with the onset of globalization the market is now

god—complete with the characteristics of all-powerful, all-knowing, and omnipresent. Similarly, Rauschenbusch's call for the proper "stewardship" of resources and public power anticipates the Christian concern today for both the economy and the environment.

When Rauschenbusch speaks of the essential "communism" of the church's history and calls for an expansion of it in the public square, he is really calling for a theology and politics of the common good and an expansion of what we today sometimes call "the commons"—the places that bring us together and serve our collective needs and interests, like parks, public protection and social services, transportation networks, communication networks, and health-care plans. The home, the public schools, and the church are all examples of "communitistic institutions" for him.

But his continual use of the word *communism* is jarring to modern readers, who know the terrible costs to human freedom and human rights later perpetrated by systems with that name. Rauschenbusch was writing in 1907, ten years before Lenin and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the onset of totalitarian communism as a political ideology, system, and threat. It is fair to say that he not only failed to anticipate any of that history but also generally missed communism's potential for collective evil. His almost Utopian dreams for the future, at the height of the progressive era and at the beginning of the century, reveal a naïveté about human nature and sin that was characteristic of the time.

The century after *Christianity and the Social Crisis* was written witnessed the horrors of Nazism and fascism, the Holocaust, communism, the Cold War, Western imperialism, other genocides, and now global terrorism—all perpetrated by states or groups in the name of religion. None of these were anticipated by Rauschenbusch's projections of unmatched human progress.

On the contrary, he thought that, "with all our faults and our slothfulness we modern men in many ways are more on a level with the real mind of Jesus than any generation that has gone before." He went further to say that "perhaps these nineteen centuries of Christian influence have been a long preliminary stage of growth, and now the flower and fruit are almost here. If at this juncture we can rally sufficient religious faith and moral strength to snap the bonds of evil and turn the

present unparalleled economic and intellectual resources of humanity to the harmonious development of a true social life, the generations yet unborn will mark this as that great day of the Lord for which the ages waited." Then came the atrocities of the twentieth century.

Near the end of the final chapter, he tries a little more modesty and self-correction.

In asking for faith in the possibility of a new social order, we ask for no Utopian delusion. We know well that there is no perfection for man in this life: there is only growth toward perfection. In personal religion we look with seasoned suspicion at anyone who claims to be holy and perfect, yet we always tell men to become holy and to seek perfection. We make it a duty to seek what is unattainable. We have the same paradox in the perfectibility of society. We shall never have a perfect social life, yet we must seek it with faith.

Perhaps a better way to say it—and one that presents a clearer corrective to Rauschenbusch's social optimism at the beginning of the twentieth century—comes from the French theologian Jacques Ellul: in 1948, after witnessing the brutalities of the first half of the century, he asserted that the Christian must maintain a "perpetually revolutionary posture" that never puts faith in ideological systems and Utopian dreams.

Walter Rauschenbusch's articulation of a Christian social ethic is an eloquent and necessary corrective to privatized religion. But his view of history sometimes misses the biblical reality of evil and the Christian notion of the kingdom of God that is both "already" and "not yet." Motivated and energized by the Christian ethic of social justice, we can make concrete and dramatic social reforms—the abolition of slavery, the victories of the civil-rights movement, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of South African apartheid, the establishment of democracies, the advancements of human rights, the protection of the environment, the peaceful resolution of conflicts—but never can we bring in social Utopias. Human revolutions and ideologies ultimately disappoint and fall far short of their promises and can often lead to more injustice. But the reforms are worth all the effort and sacrifice,

and they point to the ultimate reign of God. In the meantime, our hopes for social transformation must be tempered by Christian realism and by a social and religious pluralism—both of which preclude the “Christianizing” of society for which Rauschenbusch hoped.

Near the end of the book, Rauschenbusch says it himself: “At best there is always but an approximation to a perfect social order. The kingdom of God is always but coming. But every approximation to it is worthwhile.” Amen.

# Buds That Never Opened

*Richard Rorty*

Secular humanists like myself think of the doctrine of original sin as having, disastrously, diverted the attention of Christians from the needs of their neighbors to the state of their own souls. So what we like best about Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis* is its dismissal of the Pauline claim that we are corrupt and in desperate need of purification. "The ascetic ideal," Rauschenbusch argues, was "originally due to non-Christian influences." He deplores the fact that that ideal has "so long been able to pose as almost the essence of Christian morality" (chapter 4, "The ascetic tendency").

Rauschenbusch was well aware that many readers would accuse him of ignoring, as he put it, "the sinfulness of the human heart" (chapter 7, "Social repentance and faith")—a charge that Niebuhr and other critics later reiterated. But he hoped to persuade them that it was society, rather than individual souls, that stood in need of redemption—that they should not think of Jesus as their *personal* savior. Jesus did not come to save you, but to teach that you and your neighbor, working together, can create a just society. "Religious individualism," Rauschenbusch claims, "was a triumph of faith under abnormal conditions, and not a triumph of religious life" (chapter 1, "Summary"). He asked Christians to "have faith enough to believe that ... God saves not only the soul, but the whole of human life; that anything which serves to make men healthy, intelligent, happy, and good is a service to the Father of men" (chapter 7, "Social evangelization").

Rauschenbusch urged us to think of Jesus as the successor of the Hebrew prophets, whose great theme—at least before the national catastrophe to which Jeremiah was reacting (chapter 1, "The later

religious individualism")—was social justice. He wanted us to think of Christ not as our link with another, better world—the immaterial world dreamed up by Plato—but as having shown us how to live worthwhile lives in this world. We should turn away from the Platonized, logocentric Gospel of John, in which “the divine figure of the Son of God moves through the doubts and discussions of men like the silver moon sailing serene through the clouds.” Instead, we should read Luke, who “alone reports the parables of the rich fool, the unjust steward, and Divus and Lazarus” (chapter 2, “His teaching on wealth”).

Rauschenbusch disliked millenarianism and apocalypticism almost as much as asceticism and individualism. He would have been as appalled by the popularity of the Left Behind novels as by the televangelists’ suggestion that making Christ one’s business partner ensures success. He loathed the idea that the task of Christians is to keep themselves clean while awaiting the Second Coming. He rejected the idea that there is a Divine Plan working itself out in history and, more generally, that only divine intervention can make a significant difference to the human condition. He hoped that Christians would come to believe that they might, by their own efforts, create the kingdom of God here on earth.

Rauschenbusch urged Christians to set aside hopes for eternal life (hopes that he himself does not seem to have shared) and to focus instead on the suffering being inflicted daily by the strong upon the weak. Once they had done so, the Christian churches would try to “mitigate the social hardships of the working classes by lending force to humane customs.” The churches might, for example, campaign to “secure seats and restrooms for the girls in the department stores.” That sort of reform, he said, “would not solve the fundamental questions of capitalism, but it would ease the pressure a little and would save the people from deterioration, while the social movement is moving toward the larger solution” (chapter 7, “The creation of customs and institutions”). He believed that this larger solution would require “collective ownership of the means of production and the abolition of the present two-class arrangement of industrial society” (chapter 7, “The upward movement of the working class”).

The hope that Christian churches might take the lead in radical social change links *Christianity and the Social Crisis* with another best-

seller, published more than half a century later: Gustavo Gutierrez's *A Theology of Liberation*. Gutierrez had the same hopes for the Catholic priests ministering to the poor of Latin America that Rauschenbusch had had for the Protestant clergy of the United States. Both men hoped that what Rauschenbusch called "ecclesiasticism" could finally be overcome, leaving the clergy free to become agents of social change.

Had Karol Wojtyla and Joseph Ratzinger embraced rather than suppressed liberation theology, the Catholic Church might have not only redeemed itself but set an example for the rest of Christendom. But they reacted to Gutierrez's book with distrust and fear, and so his hopes were short-lived. Rauschenbusch's vision, however, was more viable. For some fifty years after his death, American politicians trying to cobble together a welfare state could rely on the support of tens of thousands of Christian ministers who had been inspired by *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. During that half-century, the Social Gospel was a force in political life. But by the 1970s religious individualism had begun to stage a comeback. Nowadays American Protestantism is once again dominated by the apocalyptic millenarianism against which Rauschenbusch struggled.

One hundred years ago, there was still a chance that the Christian churches would play a central role in the struggle for social justice—that Christian, rather than Marxist, ideas would inspire radical socio-political change. One can imagine a twentieth century in which the two World Wars and the Great Depression were avoided, the Bolshevik Revolution collapsed, and social democrats like Eugene Debs and Jean Jaures were elected to high office, thanks to the enthusiastic support of the Christian clergy. Decolonialization and the entrance of India and China on the international stage could then have taken place against the background of a consensus, in the West, that building a global egalitarian society was a moral obligation. With a bit more luck, Rauschenbusch's dream could have come true, despite "the sinfulness of the human heart."

But our luck was bad, and Christianity has probably missed its chance. The likelihood that religion will play a significant role in the struggle for justice seems smaller now than at any time since *Christianity and the Social Crisis* was published. In Western Europe, where the influence of social democratic ideas has been greatest, there has been

no return to religion; the term *Christian Socialism* no longer has resonance. In the United States and various other places in the world, such a return is indeed taking place, but it is producing forms of religiosity that have little to do with hopes for a cooperative commonwealth.

In the last paragraph of his book, Rauschenbusch writes that “perhaps these nineteen centuries of Christian influence have been a long preliminary stage of growth, and now the flower and fruit are almost here” (chapter 7, “The new apostolate”). Even unbelievers like myself can agree that without that influence—without all those sermons on Rauschenbusch’s favorite texts from Luke—we would have had neither the democratic revolutions of the eighteenth century nor the rise of socialist ideals in the nineteenth. It was no accident that the push for socioeconomic equality first gained momentum in a part of the world where such sermons had been preached, generation after generation. By 1907 centuries of such preaching had created a climate of opinion in which it was reasonable to anticipate flowers and fruit. Rauschenbusch and his contemporaries could not have foreseen the fierce, blighting storms that were to come.