

The Progressive Era and Progressive Christianity

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Coming out of the War Between the States, modern Christianity in America gradually formed two distinct paths. The progressive form of Christianity, which was well established by 1830 but not fully formed until around the turn of the century, continued to grow in the Northeast and in other areas that were populated by people emigrating from the Northeast. The theology of this branch was very adaptable and continually secularized. The fundamentalist variant spun off from progressive Christianity and although a product of Northern Puritan culture, gradually spread to the South and West. This didn't develop to a significant degree until after the war but these two Christian branches had extensive interaction and were largely competitors especially after around 1890. They were not adversaries in all respects, however, and were, for example, largely in line with each other with regard to prohibition and the church's role in the run up to World War I. While they are closely related, it is best to approach each separately and we will address progressive Christianity first principally because fundamentalism was largely a reaction to progressivism.

We have seen to this point that the Northern Protestant Evangelical Church, alternatively referred to as Pietists, has shown a consistent pattern of secularization and modernization that manifested itself in political activism but in the later part of the 19th century it was to change in both type and breadth. Up until this point the progressive church focused on managing or constraining individual behaviors and the vision was generally national in scope. Now the progressive church was to expand to a global vision to spread the puritan empire around the world and to act strategically to manage demographics, economics, and thought. While not all progressives originated from the church, most did and religious thought provided the philosophical basis for the progressive movement. It was not a movement that ever established broad popular support. In fact, in terms of the percentage of the population it represented, progressive Christianity remained relatively small and was shrinking but it was the belief system of the rich, powerful and influential and provided a motivation and purpose for the youth of elite society that was taught and preached through the university and seminary systems of the established denominations.

Most modern books on progressive Christianity laud its accomplishments from the perspective of modern political correctness but there are several relatively recent resources that present a more accurate perspective that includes both cultural and theological context. One current author who takes on the overall belief system from a historically Christian point of reference is Richard Gamble of Hillsdale University in *"The War for Righteousness, The Great War and the Rise of the Messianic Nation"*. This is an excellent book that links back to ministers and sermons from the nation's puritan beginnings through World War I and its immediate aftermath. It is a key source for several of the subjects that follow and is definitely recommended reading to acquire a deeper knowledge of Church history. Another major source book for the section is *"The Progressive Era"* by Murray Rothbard which was released posthumously and was compiled from numerous essays. Although not intended to specifically address

religion as a separate subject, it extensively analyzes the interaction of race, religion, and politics during the period. A third notable source book that was used extensively by Rothbard is *Cross of Cultures* by Paul Kleppner first published in 1970 that provides a detailed statistical analysis of demographic voting patterns principally from the Midwest.

While the goals and aspirations of the political church became ever grander, the underlying vision of a united conforming society remained. Coming out of the failed War of Southern Independence the vision became clearer and seemed achievable. It also in many ways became more dangerous in its ability to promote “good wars” and turn conflicts originally based on political and economic objectives into moral and religious crusades.

When people become absolutely convinced of the righteousness of their own cause it allows them to see their adversaries as forces of evil where, apart from repentance or conversion, their destruction isn't simply justifiable but is necessary. To use a term popularized by the 2016 US election, they become “deplorables”. This theme existed in the run up to the War Between the States, but at this phase in our history the vision expanded to be global and very much continues as such today. Author Richard Gamble, citing Irish Philosopher George Berkeley (Bishop of Cloyne) from the mid-1700's, described the puritan inclination to readily sort the forces of good from evil as follows:

With surprising consistency, though to varying degrees over time and with shifting emphases, Americans have been habitually drawn to language that is redemptive, apocalyptic, and expansive. Americans have long experienced and articulated a sense of urgency, of hanging on the precipice of great change, of living in the “fifth act” of history, as poet and philosopher George Berkeley famously wrote about the emerging American empire in the eighteenth century. They have fallen easily into the Manichean habit of dividing the world into darkness and light, Evil and Good, past and future, Satan and Christ. They have seen themselves as a progressive, redemptive force, waging war in the ranks of Christ's army, or have imagined themselves even as Christ Himself, liberating those in bondage and healing the afflicted. (1 p. 5)

The Secular and sacred became blurred if the distinction ever existed in the first place, and the American journey became intertwined with Biblical history, images, and language which developed a sort of dual meaning (1 pp. 5-7). Historian Ernest Lee Tuveson observed in *Redeemer Nation*, “*they considered themselves in fact as advancing to the next step beyond the Reformation—the actual reign of the spirit of Christ, the amalgamation of the City of the World into the City of God.*” In the colonial period, the renown Puritan Minister Cotton Mather projected this vision saying, “*the General Restoration of Mankind from the Curse of the Fall, and the opening of [the last stage in] that Scheme of the Divine Proceedings, which was to bring a blessing upon all the Nations of the Earth.*” (2 p. 97)

This sort of thinking didn't make inroads into the Evangelical South until at least the 1890's and then only slowly after that. It was, however, the belief system of the Northern elite or political class and was overwhelmingly represented in politics and all forms of literature and media and it's not hard to find evidence of this in the writings and speeches of many prominent political figures from the founders to present day. Showing the consistency of the ideal of a purified and united society, in a diary entry from

1775 John Adams made quite clear how he perceived both his puritan religious heritage and culture along with all of those others who weren't part of this elect group. *"I always consider the settlement of America with reverence and wonder, as the opening of a grand scene and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant, and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth."* (2 p. 25)

During the time period after the war, the primary external influence on progressive Christianity shifted gradually away from Transcendentalism to Scientific Naturalism and Social Darwinism. This, in turn, broke down the idea of natural rights or God given rights, that even the Deists of the revolutionary period generally held to, and left the concept of individual rights in relation to collective society as nothing more than something that collective humanity can bestow and take away (3 pp. 98-99). Scientific naturalism and Darwinism entered through the colleges and universities, most notably Yale and Harvard, and spread through the seminaries but were not equally influential in all areas or schools. Most notably, Princeton, which was tied to the Presbyterians, developed as a pillar of resistance to this sort of modernizing (3 pp. 98-99). Because of its linkage to the educational system the influence of materialist thought increased as one generation aged and was replaced with the next.

Social Darwinism, while conceptually linked to Charles Darwin, cannot be specifically attributed to him. Scientifically Darwinism contended that lower life forms could adapt therefore gradually creating higher life forms based on random changes that sequentially improved survivability. When projected outside of the realm of biology it infers that life is driven by mechanical and deterministic processes and that outcomes are inevitable. His theory didn't address the development of the universe as the universe as seen through atheistic thought at time was believed to be static and eternal. The observations upon which Darwinism was based really only addressed variations within species. Taking the basic concept of the most desired variations becoming dominant and applying it to individual or small group decision making, as in the case of a family or businesses, this would simply hold that better decisions lead to better outcomes and those will tend to become dominant behaviors assuming natural results of human decision making are not tampered with. To an extent this is true but it is equally true that bad decisions and outcomes also repeat themselves, both with and without environmental influence, so this would be far from a mechanistic law. When applied to groups or cultures, however, social Darwinism becomes extremely dangerous as it provides justification for one group to forcibly dominate, reshape, and even eradicate another group. In the context of progressive Christianity during this time period, it became justification for cultural eradication that expanded to an international level.

In 1879 former Episcopalian Rector and Yale faculty member William Graham Sumner said in a public lecture on the subject:

"If we do not like the survival of the fittest, we have only one possible alternative, and that is the survival of the unfittest. The former is the law of civilization; the latter is the law of anti-civilization. We have our choice between the two, or we can go on, as in the past, vacillating between the two, but a third plan, the social determinism – a plan for nourishing the unfittest and yet advancing civilization, no man will ever find". (3 p. 102)

“The truth is that social order is fixed by laws of nature precisely analogous to those of the physical order. The most that man can do is by his ignorance and conceit is to mar the operation of the social sciences” (3 p. 103)

Author and religious historian Gregg Singer said of Sumner’s commentary, *“It is obvious this could only have been uttered by one who had completely dismissed from his thinking the Christian view of man, and this was the case with Sumner, He denied that man was created by God in his own image and instead that he is completely the product of blind natural (evolutionary) forces. That man had no real control over his own destiny, but is swept along by natural and cultural forces over which he has no control, and in the face of which, he is helpless. This was also true of the social order of which he is apart (3 p. 103).”*

It’s also clear that according to this sort of thought, the individual is simply part of the larger group and has no inherent standing or protection from the will of the group.

In contrast to the form of social Darwinism espoused by William Graham Summer and others like Herbert Spencer to justify *“survival of the fittest”*, there was an alternative reform interpretation associated with social reformers and the developing social gospel. Reform Darwinism is most strongly associated with Lester Frank Ward and led to the development of the welfare movement which started to take root not long after the war and kept expanding and being integrated into the government. Both were similar in looking at outcomes as being deterministic but the reformers sought to intervene in natural outcomes which would control the *“evils of evolution”* and would inevitably drive society towards socialism (3 pp. 112-3). Ward’s views of shaping society are reflected this quote from *The Psychic Factors of Civilization*:

“In this great struggle (for survival) brute force played a diminishing part, and mind an increasing one. Low cunning and animal sagacity, though very prominent, were more and more supplanted by more refined and subtle manifestations of the same psychic principle. This advance was greatly accelerated by the growth of institutions and the establishment of codes of conduct requisite to life of collectivity. The rude animal methods were intolerable by natural selection, if not otherwise, society discarded them.” (4 pp. 156-7)

This would seem to provide an answer to the question posed by Sumner of, *“if not the fittest”*, then what, although not necessarily a satisfactory one. Here he has envisioned a process run by collective man to replace what he saw as a harsh mechanical process that, in the mind of the social Darwinist, had already replaced God. Ward, who is credited with the creation of Sociology as an academic discipline, was from the upper Midwest, of solid Puritan stock and a Union Army soldier which is a pattern we will see generally repeated amongst progressive activists of this era. In looking forward, the conservative version of social Darwinism would largely correlate to the handling or justification of American foreign policy while domestic policy would come under ever increasing influence of reform Darwinism.

The Chart below shows regional percentages by major denomination at around the peak of the progressive era. While the non-liturgical protestant percentages were steady and slightly increasing in the Northern, Middle, and Midwest states they were a relatively small minority group.

	Denominational Adherents as percent of population 1906								
Region	Cong	Episc	Pres	Bapt	Meth	Catholic	Luth	Total	Not-Lit Prot
New England	6.44%	3.02%	0.26%	4.64%	3.86%	36.28%	0.78%	55.28%	18.22%
Midwest and West	1.57%	1.09%	3.06%	2.96%	7.92%	16.86%	6.47%	39.93%	16.60%
Middle	0.65%	3.12%	4.95%	3.32%	7.54%	25.58%	3.92%	49.08%	19.58%
Upper South and Border	0.19%	0.91%	3.64%	18.50%	13.27%	6.99%	0.93%	44.43%	36.51%
Deep South	0.08%	0.60%	2.23%	25.68%	17.06%	7.29%	0.64%	53.57%	45.64%
Total	1.27%	1.60%	3.22%	9.30%	9.87%	17.35%	3.66%	46.28%	25.26%
Note: Children not counted in church affiliation									

Because Progressive Christianity was statistically a relatively small movement, to fill the ranks of “*Christ’s Armies*” required the conscription of many others either through coercion or deceit. Wars must be sold to the public generally as moral and religious crusades generally by leveraging and distorting singular events. The coming Great War would be an example of this.

Throughout history social movements tend to, along with a creed, develop their own historical narrative accompanied by ways of purifying their own ranks and progressive Christianity was no exception. Their view of history characterized by continuous improvement and perfection was carried over into their interpretation of history. Literary and cultural commentator Sacvan Bercovitch, who is considered a foremost scholar on puritan America writes, “*they incorporated Bible history into the American experience—they substituted a regional for a biblical past, consecrated the American present as a movement from promise to fulfillment, and translated fulfillment from its meaning within a closed system of sacred history into a metaphor of limitless secular improvement*” (5 pp. 93-94). Progressive interpretations of history and religion were taught and propagated through a seminary system that emphasized social service and an interdenominational federation that choked out alternative views until a rival fundamentalists/dispensationalist seminary system rose to counter it in the late 1800’s.

Quoting again from Richard Gamble and War for Righteousness, he summarizes the key underlying beliefs and assumptions of Puritan Theology entering this new era as follows:

While progressive Christianity’s skill at reconstructing institutions would become clear as it tackled first the church, then American society, and ultimately international affairs, its theology was grounded in a few elemental assumptions about the way the world worked. First among these assumptions was a belief in inherent, inevitable spiritual progress, in the gradual tendency of the physical universe and of human history toward the good, a process that determined the manner in which God achieved His will. For the progressives, the world was in motion. But this was not a random or inscrutable movement. Creation, humanity, and history were not merely changing; they were changing in a clear direction, toward a knowable goal, toward nothing less than the kingdom of God on earth. This idea of purposeful, teleological change dominated the intellectual world of the late nineteenth century. The law of evolution that was thought to control the natural world was presumed to direct the spiritual world as well. Plymouth’s pastor Lyman Abbott believed that development in these two realms, the physical and the spiritual, was not merely analogous but also a synonymous, manifestation of a single force. “The law of

progress,” as he claimed, “is the same in both.” Citing Herbert Spencer’s belief in evolution as a unifying principle, he argued that “nothing is more certain than this, that we are ever in the presence of an Infinite and Eternal Energy from which all things proceed.” (1 p. 30)

Bibliography

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