Introduction

In 1958 Martin Luther King Jr. acknowledged his intellectual debt to a movement in American religious history commonly called the “social gospel.” Citing the impact of the early twentieth-century church leader Walter Rauschenbusch, King noted that Rauschenbusch’s social gospel had pushed Christian theology beyond a concern for individual salvation to engage questions of social justice. At its core, religious faith needed to address questions of systemic political change. “It has been my conviction ever since reading Rauschenbusch that any religion which professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that scar the soul, is a spiritually moribund religion only waiting for the day to be buried.”

In 1996 another religious activist concurred with King, contending that religion had an implicit mission to change the social fabric of modern life. This author affirmed that Rauschenbusch and King were part of a wider history of American religious political engagement, “the story of slumbering faith awakening from the pews and flowing into school board meetings, courtrooms, slums, and state capitols.” What is perhaps surprising is that this second activist was not a theological liberal but the longtime head of the conservative-based Christian Coalition, Ralph Reed.

Reed’s gloss of American religious history ignored important nuances in historians’ definitions of the social gospel. At the same time, the fact that Reed sought to recast a religious heritage with deep-seated connections to theological and political liberalism is significant. Reed’s identification of the Christian Coalition with the social gospel is indicative of how broadly defined—and historically contested—the movement has been in American history.

Largely associated with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American Protestantism, the social gospel was a religious movement that applied a liberal theology to a range of social reform measures
that would become associated with the political left. However, as Ralph Reed's uncritical use of this term suggests, the social gospel is a somewhat elastic concept, often used broadly to denote any sort of religious engagement with social issues. To trace the rise of the social gospel in American religious history and its legacy in the twentieth century is the purpose of this book.

Defining and Interpreting the Social Gospel

While many scholars date the social gospel's origin and apex roughly to the Progressive Era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they have long debated precise definitions of the social gospel, what persons/groups fall under the rubric of this term, and when this tradition ended. In 1921 Shailer Mathews, professor of New Testament interpretation at the University of Chicago Divinity School, presented one of the most cited (and innocuous) definitions of the social gospel as “the application of the teaching of Jesus and the total message of the Christian salvation to society, the economic life, and social institutions such as the state, the family, as well as to individuals.” Mathews's phrase “the application of the teaching of Jesus” illustrates how certain religious leaders have interpreted the social gospel as a unique model of “applied” religion. Specifically, Mathews noted that the social gospel modeled a modern tradition of religious ethics. There was nothing particularly novel about understanding a religious tradition, like Christianity, through ethical engagement. Yet the social gospel embodied a new understanding of social engagement that challenged earlier suppositions coming out of previous religious movements in America, especially in the nation's Protestant churches.

As a way to orient the reader, I offer a definition of the social gospel that will anchor the discussion in this book: The social gospel was an offshoot of theological liberalism that strove to apply a progressive theological vision to engage American social, political, and economic structures. Rooted in wider historical-theological developments in American Protestantism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the social gospel integrated evangelical and liberal theological strands in ways that advocated for systemic, structural changes in American institutions. The movement had a wide-ranging impact on religion and society through-
out the twentieth century, cresting during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. This definition stresses three characteristics of the social gospel as a broadly based religious movement in American history: first, its social idealism, emanating from its distinctive liberal synthesis; second, a belief that a primary objective of religion was to advocate for systemic social changes along politically progressive and, at times, radical lines; and finally, a motivation to promote a vision of America as a religiously and culturally pluralistic society.

The social gospel’s religious idealism developed out of the movement’s unique origins in nineteenth-century American Protestantism. Although this book’s narrative seeks to broaden the religious base for understanding the social gospel as a theological tradition, it pays close attention to how this movement emerged out of distinctive currents of evangelical and liberal Protestantism. This intersection helped to fuse earlier visions of Protestantism’s mission to an emerging late nineteenth-century belief that equated Christian teachings with specific social-economic reform efforts. Part of this book’s goal is to analyze what many scholars have identified as the classic social gospel era, corresponding roughly from the final quarter of the nineteenth century through the first quarter of the twentieth century. In the context of post–Civil War America, many religious leaders were coming to terms with a nation that was coping with immigration, industrialization, urbanization, and new manifestations of institutional racism. Those who embraced what became known as the social gospel were alarmed by the social inequalities that existed in American society and increasingly challenged taken-for-granted assumptions about the inherent goodness of laissez-faire capitalism. For some scholars, the social gospel has been interpreted as the religious wing of the Progressive Era, in that its major leaders embraced a long-standing belief that the nation’s moral–ethical fabric depended upon the strength of its religious—chiefly Protestant—-institutions.

However, this book argues that far from disappearing, the social gospel continued to exert a strong influence in North America long after the end of the Progressive Era, both within and outside religious organizations. While many Protestant churches and institutions went through a period after World War I of reassessing their missional identities, the core theological ideals of the social gospel continued to have a wide impact on American religious and secular institutions.
might argue that the period between the early 1920s and the early 1960s could be called the long social gospel era, when many aspects of the original movement’s theology were being rethought and reapplied in American society.

In examining the history of the social gospel, we need to explore how the theological heritage of the movement extended throughout the twentieth century. Indeed, in order to trace the history of what some have called the religious left in America, we need to examine and interpret the history of the social gospel. Although this book follows a historical chronology, it pays particular attention to four significant aspects of the social gospel as a distinctive movement in American religious history: its evangelical heritage, its relationship to theological liberalism, its connections with the political left, and its institutional legacy.

1. Evangelical Heritage

When early historians of the social gospel searched for theological roots of the tradition, they tended to concentrate on developments coming out of New England Unitarianism. There is no doubt that early nineteenth-century Unitarianism, with its emphasis on human goodness and its proclivity to look at religion through an ethical rather than doctrinal lens played an important role in the foundation of American theological liberalism. Yet when one looks at the emergence of the social gospel in the late nineteenth century, and especially examines the movement as it matured in the early twentieth century, the echoes of a larger historical tradition of nineteenth-century evangelical Protestantism are unmistakable.

For much of the nineteenth century, American Protestantism was dominated by churches and denominations steeped in numerous currents of evangelicalism. Largely associated with a tradition of revivalism coming out of the First and Second Great Awakenings of the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Protestant evangelicalism stressed the importance of an individual’s conversion experience, often referred to by evangelicals as the “new birth.” While conversion was primarily personal, this piety had a societal component as well. Extending back to the founding of the first English-speaking American colonies in the 1600s, Protestant evangelicalism was strongly millennial. This belief
in Christ’s imminent second coming often expressed itself in efforts to make society more righteous in advance of this event. Evangelical optimism was especially evident in America during the early nineteenth century leading up to the Civil War. This millennial spirit, which scholars have called postmillennialism, manifested itself in a variety of Protestant efforts at social reform, including long-standing Protestant crusades for temperance, economic reform, women’s rights, and most especially, the abolition of slavery. While it is true that nineteenth-century revivalists like Charles Finney were primarily concerned with individual salvation, they stressed that personal conversion could lead to lives of personal holiness that would be marked by changed societal behavior.\(^\text{12}\)

By the early 1870s, discernible changes were beginning to occur in many Protestant churches. For several evangelicals, themes surrounding Christ’s imminent return became more apocalyptic. Instead of seeing millennialism in a socially progressive light, emerging movements of what became known as premillennialism insisted that societal conditions would grow worse in advance of the second coming.\(^\text{13}\) In a sense, the social gospel, especially in its classic phase, embraced aspects of the evangelical tradition of postmillennialism rather than premillennialism. Although social gospelers were not obsessed by the idea of a literal second coming, they believed that a central goal of Christianity was to create a righteous society that could approximate a heavenly kingdom on earth. At a time in the late nineteenth century when increasing numbers of evangelicals were turning toward premillennialism, those who became associated with the social gospel often expressed earlier themes of evangelical postmillennialism through a liberal theological lens.\(^\text{14}\)

In the late nineteenth century, numerous Protestants continued to manifest earlier interests in social reform, reflected in an array of evangelical movements from the Salvation Army to the ministries associated with the urban revivalist Dwight Moody. Many social gospel leaders supported these forms of outreach. Yet what differentiated the social gospelers was their growing insistence that social reform required more than individual conversions or charitable giving to the poor. Modern evangelicalism needed to inject its spirit into the social structures of the nation. “To become fully Christian the Church must come out of its spiritual isolation,” Walter Rauschenbusch asserted in 1912. “Like all
the rest of us, the Church will get salvation by finding the purpose of its existence outside of itself, in the Kingdom of God, the perfect life of the race.”

The exact shape of this “kingdom of God” meant different things to different groups of Protestants, and the term becomes even more suspect when one looks at examples of social reform in Judaism and Catholicism. However, for many social gospelers, the kingdom of God was a powerful and dynamic theological concept. It served as a prism to judge religion’s role in seeking to change American social institutions, including government, businesses, families, and even cultural structures. Put another way, social gospel leaders believed that salvation was not about escaping the sins of the world, it was about saving the world.

Importantly, many of the social gospel’s primary leaders, especially during its inception and maturity at the turn of the twentieth century, did not define themselves primarily as social reformers. Their commitments to social reform emerged out of a desire to stave off the growing influence in American religion of various apocalyptic theologies that saw the world as an evil place that would come to an end in the near future. Social gospel leaders like Walter Rauschenbusch were vigorously denounced by religious leaders who later were branded “fundamentalists.” At the same time, social gospelers strongly identified themselves as part of a wider Protestant heritage that was being contested by a range of other theological and missional viewpoints during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Despite the critical role that the social gospel played in American religion, the theological legacy of the movement has largely been interpreted through the lens of neo-orthodox and crisis theologians who emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly Reinhold Niebuhr. The common perception created by these theologians—that the social gospel offered a myopic vision of social progress and lacked an adequate understanding of human sin and depravity—was a gross caricature. Most social gospelers took for granted that their message, like that of Jesus and the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures, would be rejected by the majority of society and by their own religious traditions. Reflecting back on his ministry in 1912, Rauschenbusch described his early commitment to the social gospel as a time of great uncertainty and, to a degree, of being forced to work as a pariah in the churches. “We were few,
and we shouted in the wilderness. . . . Our older friends remonstrated with us for wrecking our career. We ourselves saw the lions’ den plainly before us, and only wondered how the beasts would act this time.”

Such sentiment was not unique. Part of what historians have sometimes overlooked is that even though the social gospel did have a discernible impact on the shape of institutional Protestantism in the early years of the twentieth century, many social gospelers took upon themselves the role of what R. Laurence Moore has called “religious outsiders.”

Even as someone like Rauschenbusch could speak confidently in 1912 of “Christianizing the social order,” he and other social gospelers worried that churches needed to be vigilant in the face of societal forces that were working against the achievement of justice.

One historian used the metaphor of a “God of battles” to characterize the social gospel’s theological vision. Social gospelers believed that God worked in history to transform the conditions of individuals and societies to create a just world. However, those who did the work of God had to confront a society made up of forces that opposed these changes. Whether it was combating the misguided teachings of religious conservatives or opposing the forces of big-money capitalism, the social gospelers were engaged in a battle for the soul of the nation, a struggle that often required them to suffer the consequences of their faith in the face of an unbelieving world. At times, this zeal led proponents of the social gospel into many examples of prophetic action. Yet, like earlier examples in the history of American Protestantism, it also led social gospelers to a false sense of their own cherished place in American society.

2. Theological Liberalism

The major difference between the social gospel and other forms of religiously based social reform that developed during the Progressive Era is that the social gospel movement represented a unique outcropping of theological liberalism. The roots of American liberalism go back into the eighteenth century, but it wasn’t until the early nineteenth century that liberalism emerged as a distinctive theological heritage in North America. Historically, liberals tended to affirm a positive view of human capacities, rejecting orthodox theologies of original sin and human depravity. As the nineteenth century progressed, those who
became associated with theological liberalism also embraced emerging trends in biblical higher criticism, intellectual developments in the natural sciences, such as Darwinian views of evolution, and quite often new currents of Western philosophy, particularly schools of liberalism rooted in nineteenth-century German theology. These trends contributed to what scholars frequently call a “modernist” view of religion, which was committed to the goal of harmonizing religious beliefs with the developing intellectual currents of a reason-dominated Enlightenment world.

Yet many of these modernist liberals showed little or no interest in engaging questions of social reform. What tended to differentiate the liberalism of the social gospel from other theological liberals was the desire to use theology as the basis for creating a mandate to structurally change society. As the social ethicist Gary Dorrien points out, “the notion that Christianity has a mission to transform the structures of society is distinctly modern.”

This modern view of religion’s role—what many in the social gospel movement called “social salvation”—extends beyond Protestantism. In the late nineteenth century, modernist arguments in philosophy, theology, and the social sciences were also impacting a range of figures in Judaism and Catholicism. Although there were of course significant differences among these various religious voices, they shared a common belief that religion was central to the redemption of society, along decidedly ethical lines. As expressed by Walter Rauschenbusch, the goal of religion was not simply to change individual behavior; religion’s goal was to change people such that the chief goal of a person was to serve the common good. “When we submit to God, we submit to the supremacy of the common good. Salvation is the voluntary socializing of the soul.”

Although social gospel adherents reflected varying degrees of commitment toward liberal theology, they shared a conviction that the central purpose of religious faith was the creation of a just society, defined initially along politically progressive lines. Like other figures associated with the Progressive Era of the early twentieth century, social gospelers advocated for the creation of government initiatives to protect the rights of the poor, such as the regulation of working hours and the creation of a minimum wage. By the end of World War I, however, many proponents of the social gospel increasingly pushed the parameters of this progressivism by arguing for more radical social-political changes.
in American society. This broader passion to address political processes emerged from social gospel leaders’ interpretation of scripture. By the early twentieth century, representatives of the social gospel were galvanized by a theological fixation on the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures and the model of the “historical Jesus” presented in the synoptic gospels of the New Testament—the shared tradition of the historical Jesus in the books of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. However, what drove their interpretation of scripture was an idealistic belief that men and women, in partnership with God, could change the course of history. Not only did religion need to address questions of social-political import, but it needed to engage these questions in ways that led to positive social change—change that often focused on a wide range of left-leaning political ideologies.

This book argues that the social gospel’s staying power had much to do with its impact as a movement of liberal idealism that traversed a wide range of religious and secular institutions. By the mid-twentieth century, the social gospel was often caricatured by its critics as theologically naïve and overoptimistic. However, the tradition showed its ability to evolve theologically and institutionally. By the end of World War II, the social gospel ideology was not only anchored in churches and religious institutions, but was increasingly expressed in a range of religious and secular movements that impacted emerging social movements of the 1950s, 1960s, and beyond.

3. The Political Left

A central contention of this book is that we cannot understand the social gospel without examining its contributions to the politics of the political left. Earlier scholarship on the social gospel has tended to emphasize the tradition’s identity as a middle-class movement and its fidelity to preserving long-standing social and religious institutions. While this assertion is partially accurate, it does not fully capture how the social gospel impulse interpenetrated a wide cross section of religious movements. This is especially evident when one looks at the tendency of scholars to separate the conservative aspects of the social gospel from more radical movements of social Christianity, commonly called Christian socialism. James Dombrowski, who in 1936 wrote one of the first
critical studies on the social gospel, lauded the movement for its claim that religion had a fundamental mission to change social structures. Yet he tended to define the social gospel as a politically conservative movement, in juxtaposition to more radical forms of social Christianity that embraced concrete models of political socialism.28

While it is important to examine how the concept of Christian socialism was interpreted, it is also necessary to explore how the broader social gospel movement wrestled with the implications of this ideal as it was translated into various theological and political commitments. If anything, socialism in its various forms represents a foil for the social gospel tradition. There may not have been broad support for the political platform of the Socialist Party in America in the early twentieth century, but the idealism that led socialists to advocate for workers’ rights, critique capitalist wealth, and aspire to a harmonious social order appealed to a cross section of social gospel liberals.

What ties together the persons and groups discussed in this book under the label “social gospel” is that they embody what the historian Doug Rossinow describes as the “left-liberal” political tradition. This tradition was rooted in a vision of societal progress that wanted to reform preexisting American institutions, such as churches, while also introducing more radical models of social change. Advocates of the social gospel “believed that the country was in the midst of a fundamental transformation into a new society that held the potential to become more democratic, egalitarian, and united,” offering an alternative to the unregulated wealth and materialism of American capitalism.29 Although Rossinow’s understanding of the left-liberal tradition encompasses a wide range of secular and religious movements, it is very helpful for understanding the reform mindset of many social gospelers, including reformers coming out of Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism who possessed varying degrees of sympathy with political socialism.30 John Ryan’s 1906 book *A Living Wage* stresses themes similar to those of Protestant reformers like Walter Rauschenbusch, affirming a belief that government had a moral obligation to protect the rights of the poor. However, an extensive history of American anti-Catholicism often made it difficult for Catholics and Protestants to work in partnership.31 Similar barriers were also evident for American Jewish leaders who critiqued social injustice while staving off the anti-Semitism of many of their Prot-
stant colleagues. These intersections between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews were not without tension. However, they underscore the fact that often what held the social gospel movement together was a shared desire to fuse religion and progressive political action.

This wider tradition of religiously inspired political engagement was especially evident in the nation’s African American churches, as many prominent clergy and laity in these traditions embraced various aspects of the social gospel. The greatest failure of the early social gospel movement, coming out of predominantly white Protestant churches, was an inability to systemically engage issues of racism that created, in W. E. B. Du Bois’s, words “two souls” in America. At the same time, the writings of social gospel leaders like Washington Gladden, Richard Ely, Shailer Mathews, and Walter Rauschenbusch permeated the intellectual underpinnings of many movements of African American social reform. In many ways, Walter Rauschenbusch’s legacy was cemented not just by what he did during his lifetime, but by the ways African American leaders during the civil rights era of the 1950s appropriated and reinterpreted his thought.

The social gospel was birthed in a particular array of predominantly white Protestant churches that took for granted their central location in American society. By the same token, many of the political values espoused by the tradition—the redistribution of economic resources, racial justice, and a growing commitment to a vision of America as a religiously pluralistic society—pushed the social gospel beyond its initial base within a Protestant vision of a Christian America. Throughout the twentieth century, the social gospel heritage broadened to embody a social-religious message that embraced the importance of religious and cultural pluralism. This particular contribution of the social gospel remains an underappreciated part of its legacy.

4. Institutional Legacy

Finally, to understand the development of the social gospel in American religion requires that we take seriously the various institutional manifestations of this movement. In the early nineteenth century, religious bodies in the United States were dominated by the concept of volunteerism. Many Americans believed that religious faith was determined
by what the sixteenth-century Protestant reformer Martin Luther called the “priesthood of all believers,” mainly, that religious meaning needed to be interpreted by the masses, rather than by elite individuals and groups. In the early national period, Protestants, Jews, and Catholics often relied on the efforts of dedicated laity in their churches or synagogues to fulfill a range of leadership roles in areas related to worship, administration, and fund raising. The social gospel emerged at a period in the late nineteenth century when many aspects of America’s earlier tradition of volunteerism were giving way to an increasing professionalization that relied not only on the leadership of ordained clergy, but also on an increasing array of religious “professionals” who often became identified with emerging centralized structures in many denominations and, by the early twentieth century, interdenominational organizations. This shift in emphasis was especially noticeable in several Protestant churches that became associated with the social gospel.

Many recent historians have viewed this professionalization of ministry as a symptom of institutional stagnation in American religion. In the case of American Protestantism, the increasing professionalization of ministries in centralized denominational headquarters and bureaucracies has been seen by some scholars as marking the decline of a lively religious volunteerism that led to the creation of an evangelical populism. Scholars who stress the evangelical-populist dimensions of American religion commonly see these histories in quantitative terms—focusing primarily on issues of church growth and decline. The sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark observed that “unless the church is able to re-establish greater tension with its environment it will not be able to restore the rewards needed to maintain high levels of sacrifice by the religious.”

This book challenges readers to rethink the notion that institutionalization represents a sign of religious decay; in fact, ideas and themes associated with the social gospel were often disseminated by an expanding range of leaders and institutional networks. The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century movement toward centralization in religious organizations paralleled wider movements occurring in other segments of American society, most especially in the growing efforts to expand the size and scope of the federal government in order to address social problems. The social gospel was part of a movement that increasingly
advocated for expanded government solutions to social issues such as economic justice and racial equality.

On one hand, part of telling the story of the social gospel necessitates exploring the impact of influential ministers, many of whom served as the movement’s primary theological voices. The social gospel arose at a time in the late nineteenth century when religious leaders, particularly Protestant ministers, often enjoyed enormous public status that extended beyond specific churches and denominations. Well into the twentieth century, clergy associated with the social gospel had their sermons published in numerous periodicals, and by the 1920s they reached even more listeners through mass media such as radio. However, to tell the story of the social gospel is not only to talk about the writings and activities of clergy—as important as they are to this narrative. It is also to show how a wide range of social gospel figures in the settlement house movement, women’s home missions, the Protestant ecumenical movement, the Socialist Party, the YMCA/YWCA, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and a wide range of caucuses and activist groups played a vital role in shaping and disseminating theological ideas. Examining the organizational networks that the social gospel helped to forge not only counters common arguments that its impact never extended beyond elite institutional leaders, but also shows how some of the ideas coming from social gospel pioneers like Richard Ely, Washington Gladden, and especially Walter Rauschenbusch were reinterpreted in different contexts.

The social gospel has been critiqued for its lack of mass appeal, especially when compared to popular evangelicalism. However, to understand the impact of the social gospel in American religion, we need to examine how it was indeed a “movement” that played a critical role in forging a wider tradition of religious and political activism in twentieth-century America.

The Social Gospel Movement as Social Idealism

This book underscores the point that central to the broader development of the social gospel in American religion is the evolving character of its social idealism. Recent historians have been increasingly drawn to movements of American religion that have emerged outside formal
religious institutions.³⁷ The historian Dan McKanan has observed the persistent presence of “radical religion” in American religious history, in which religious ideals are central to shaping movements of political radicalism such as abolitionism, women’s rights, and the civil rights movement.³⁸ The social gospel as a movement of religious idealism reveals an ongoing tension between the imperative to work within pre-existent religious institutions and, at other moments, to push outside them. One reason that an earlier generation of scholars was quick to point to the demise of the social gospel after World War I is that they saw it mostly through established Protestant churches. Although this institutional history is critical to understanding the social gospel’s development in the twentieth century, we must also look for ways that the key ideas and objectives of the movement had a wide impact outside explicitly religious institutions.

The first four chapters of the book deal with the period between 1880 and 1920, which many historians identify as the classic social gospel era in American religious history. Chapter 1 focuses on the shifting nineteenth-century historical context of American Protestantism that gave birth to the social gospel. Framed against the backdrop of an era in which many evangelical Protestants sought to “Christianize” America and the world, early social gospel pioneers such as Washington Gladden, Josiah Strong, and Frances Willard helped to shape the religious idealism that characterized the later social gospel. These leaders combined aspects of an earlier evangelical heritage with a liberal theology, articulating what figures like Gladden described as “social salvation”—a belief that central to Christianity’s mission was the imperative to transform individuals as well as social structures.

Chapter 2 discusses how the social currents of the late nineteenth century contributed to the theological development of the social gospel. In particular, this chapter examines what was at times a symbiotic relationship between historical interpretations of Jesus and political socialism, a relationship fleshed out in American popular culture and in ecclesiastical and academic settings. This connection between Jesus and radical political action was made by a wide cross section of Protestant churches and had many parallels to developing traditions of social reform in Roman Catholicism and Judaism, which complemented and also challenged the assumptions of the dominant Protestant churches.
Chapter 3 investigates how the theology of the social gospel matured by the early twentieth century. While focusing on the impact of Walter Rauschenbusch, the chapter compares Rauschenbusch’s classic iteration of the social gospel, epitomized in his 1907 book *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, with emerging views of religion and social reform coming from Reform Judaism and Roman Catholicism. The social gospel rose at a time when Protestant-Catholic tensions were running high and many of the classic Protestant social gospelers held discernible anti-Catholic views. Yet the ways certain Catholic leaders grafted a modernist view of social change upon a traditional theology represents a significant contrast to the approach taken by Protestant leaders, as does the work of figures within American Judaism who embraced many aspects of social gospel thinking. Jewish leaders like Emil Hirsch and Stephen Wise made frequent reference to works by leading Protestant social gospelers. However, leaders like Wise were clear that the American Jewish experience was unique and distinct from the dominant Protestant experience. Stephen Wise’s legacy is critical not only because of his engagement with Rauschenbusch’s work, but because he helped to define a template for religious-based social activism that would remain a prominent part of Judaism’s legacy in twentieth-century American religion.

Chapter 4 examines the social gospel’s institutional ascendency in American religion, specifically American Protestantism. The years from approximately 1908 to 1920 constituted an era in which the social gospel permeated the institutional fabric of numerous Protestant structures, transforming long-standing evangelical organizations like the YMCA and emerging bodies such as the Federal Council of Churches. On one hand, social gospel leaders like Rauschenbusch were confident of their institutional triumphs in American Protestantism. At the same time, developing theological and missional tensions within and outside these institutions created a rupture that affected the evolution of the social gospel tradition throughout the twentieth century. These tensions can be seen in the careers of two individuals: Harry F. Ward and Francis J. McConnell.

In the 1910s McConnell and Ward were two of the most prominent social gospel figures in American religion. As Methodists, they represented the largest Protestant denomination in the country, and both played critical roles in the institutionalization of the social gospel in
their denomination and in the Federal Council of Churches, an organization that until it merged with the National Council of Churches in 1950 symbolized many Protestant efforts to disseminate their theological and cultural worldview in America. By the early 1920s, however, the works of both men reveal a growing tension with earlier views of social gospel progressivism, and the chapter discusses an emerging conflict between the social gospel’s progressive and radical reform agendas. In many ways, the deaths in 1918 of two social gospel stalwarts, Walter Rauschenbusch and Washington Gladden, represent a symbolic transition for the movement, as much of its earlier progressive religious base became increasingly fragmented in the decades that followed.

The final three chapters examine the development of the social gospel after World War I, arguing that this era of the long social gospel culminated in the civil rights movement associated with the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. Chapter 5 discusses the growth of the social gospel during the interwar period, from the early 1920s to the early 1940s. Part of the social gospel’s legacy can be seen in the foundation of organizations like the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and its partnership with older Protestant organizations like the YMCA. With leadership steeped in social gospel theology, the FOR and YMCA were instrumental in promoting radical economic reform and increasingly drawing attention to issues such as militarism, internationalism, pacifism, and racism. These organizations reflected a growing radicalism among younger Americans, who while often alienated from institutionally based religion, were drawn to a wide range of religious youth movements that served as a model for later social activism in the twentieth century.

At the same time, the social gospel remained an active and formative impulse in American religious institutions. One key figure who embodied the ongoing institutional appeal of the social gospel after World War I was Harry Emerson Fosdick. Fosdick was the most popular liberal Protestant minister during the first half of the twentieth century, and his career illustrates how Protestant social gospel commitments were expanding in the interwar period to embrace a wider range of social issues. Additionally, the interwar period witnessed a significant turn among many social gospel leaders to religious models outside North America and Western Europe. The role of the Japanese Christian leader
Toyohiko Kagawa is especially important in illuminating how many social gospel leaders challenged earlier suppositions related to the dominant role of Western churches in mission, advocating for increasingly indigenous, non-Western leadership. 

Chapter 6 discusses the social gospel’s impact on the civil rights movement and how it engaged emerging currents from the religious and political left in the 1960s and 1970s. While Martin Luther King Jr. is certainly the central figure in the story of the civil rights movement, King’s success was undergirded by a range of leaders who subscribed to various aspects of the social gospel heritage. King’s successes in nonviolent direct action represented a high-water mark for the social gospel in America; however, the years following his death witnessed a spate of theological critics of the social gospel. Just as some religious radicals in the 1920s and 1930s questioned many of the gradualist political suppositions of the social gospel, a range of Christian theologians raised issues about the extent to which the liberalism associated with the social gospel could be an effective instrument of social change in a postcolonial world.

At the same time that many leaders questioned the social gospel’s liberal heritage as outdated, the churches and denominations most associated with the social gospel—the liberal religious mainline—suffered significant numerical losses. As these religious groups declined in the 1960s and 1970s, an eclectic assortment of Protestant and Catholic traditionalists disdained the political radicalism of churches influenced by the social gospel. The Vietnam War marked an end to an era dominated by ecumenically oriented Protestant churches, signaling a sharp decline in the social gospel movement’s influence in American religion.

As mainline Protestant influence declined drastically in the 1970s, other groups sought to seize upon aspects of the social gospel legacy, even as they often differentiated themselves from these earlier liberal movements. Chapter 7 examines the rise of the Christian Right in the late twentieth century, analyzing how conservative evangelicals reinvigorated an older social gospel rhetoric of activism—from a politically conservative base. For many conservative evangelicals, the social gospel became a catchall phrase to describe how religion was co-opted by the perceived radicalism of the left. While the emergence of the Christian Right was a major development of the late twentieth century, the chapter
also examines a movement commonly known as “progressive evangelicalism,” which often defined itself against the political stands taken by the Christian Right. Both of these movements illustrate aspects of the earlier social gospel’s agenda to “Christianize” America. Although these two evangelical groups cast themselves as angry prophets in the wilderness, they craved a greater public role for their religious traditions, not unlike the leaders of the original social gospel of the early twentieth century. In many ways, Ronald Reagan’s election in 1980 was symbolic not only of the ascendency of groups like the Christian Right, but also of the institutional displacement of the religious left, associated with the heirs of the social gospel.

The book’s conclusion reflects upon the social gospel’s legacy in the early twenty-first century, providing a summation of its historical impact and its prospects in the twenty-first century. Early twenty-first-century survey data on American religion suggest a sharp downturn in the fortunes of American religious institutions—a decline that is especially evident in the more liberal religious movements that gave birth to the social gospel. The conclusion takes up the question of whether the social gospel legacy can survive in a twenty-first-century era noted for being a time of religious pluralism but also an era of religious decline.

In my attempt to provide readers a comprehensive discussion of the topic, I have struggled to decide which individuals and groups to include in the narrative. The term “social gospel” was not widely used until the 1910s, even though the origins of the phrase date to the late nineteenth century, and its use has most often described white Protestants. Yet to exclude the stories of Jewish, Catholic, and particularly African American religious reformers in this narrative would be to ignore the contributions of these nonwhite, non-Protestant groups on the broader history of religious-based social reform in American history. While I recognize the difficulty of using the term “social gospel” in discussing African American, Jewish, and Catholic reformers, it is important to note that figures like Reverdy Ransom, Stephen Wise, and John Ryan were quite cognizant of the ways their social thought contributed to the wider movement of religiously based social reform—what many Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant leaders in the early twentieth century called the “social awakening”—of which the predominantly white Protestant social gospel was part.
As this book discusses, the interactions between numerically dominant white Protestants and their African American, Catholic, and Jewish counterparts were often complex and contested, even as religious engagement among American Protestants concerning the place of the social gospel was also complex and contested. The figures in this book often discovered, sometimes painfully, the limits of their theological ideals to make permanent changes in the nation’s social fabric. And yet the conversation about the public role of religion in America is just as vital today as it was during the lifetime of Walter Rauschenbusch. Quite simply, to understand the social gospel’s impact is indispensable for any conversation about the larger importance of religion in American history.