

## **Two Social Gospels or One TWU February 8, 2012**

May I begin by saying a word of thanks for the invitation to give the annual Mel Smith lecture, but also with a confession of some trepidation as to the obvious political differences between myself and many who have given these lectures in the past. In any event, I congratulate TWU for sharing the view that more dialogue between the different political expressions of Christianity in our public life will hopefully be good both for the Christian community and for the country.

The title of today's lecture has its origins in part in the context of a weekend seminar six years ago this month in Ottawa, called Navigating the Faith-Political Interface. The event was sponsored by Trinity Western University's Laurentian Leadership Centre and Tyndale University College and Seminary, in association with the Manning Centre for Building Democracy. The seminar began on Thursday February 23<sup>rd</sup> with the viewing of a video produced for Vision TV entitled The Social Gospel and the Public Good which compared and contrasted the religious /political work of J.S. Woodsworth and William Aberhart, and the work and legacies of their respective principal disciples. Tommy Douglas and Ernest Manning. The viewing of the video was followed by a discussion between Preston Manning and myself.

The video lumped together the Aberhart-Manning tradition and the Woodsworth-Douglas tradition under the one umbrella term of the social gospel. But there was, or is, also a tendency on the part of Preston Manning to characterize these two traditions as being branches of the same root, like the two great streams of the Saskatchewan River, if I remember correctly the metaphor he employed.

I refer to that February 2006 evening in Ottawa with Preston Manning in my recently published book, in order to discuss a common criticism offered of the religious left, by the religious right, an analysis put forward that evening by to the effect that the problem with folks like me is that we are too preoccupied with the horizontal dimension of reality, with the world that is, and pay too little attention to the vertical, to our relationship with God. This way of thinking is arguably open to the charge of a certain spiritual hubris or self-righteousness, in so far as it presupposes that Christians on the activist left have a flawed or somehow inadequate spirituality, and that Christians on the right have a superior spiritual life.

Yet the biblical evidence seems overwhelming that one of the major signs, indeed one might argue, the major sign, of whether one's vertical relationship is alright is precisely how much attention one pays to the world. As the pre-eminent Canadian Roman Catholic theologian Gregory Baum noted in his book *The Social Imperative*, over forty years ago in 1971 the Third Synod of Bishops, convened in Rome, not only recognized the reality of "social sin", it rejected any distinction between the vertical and the horizontal dimension of the faithful life that rendered engagement with the struggle for social justice a second class spiritual activity. But we need not rely on episcopal authority in this matter. It seems to me that in the gospel account of the final judgement, in scripture, it is

only so-called horizontal evidence that is sought in the process of sorting the sheep from the goats.

In any event, it is clear from any reading of what was said at the time, or what has been said since about that time, that though the two branches of the Saskatchewan river may have the same root, whatever we come to describe that as, they understood and described themselves as two very different things. Indeed, apart from aforementioned video, even Preston Manning himself refers not to two versions of the social gospel movement, but to the social gospel movement in western Canada and the evangelical movement in western Canada, two different movements with a shared geography and a shared experience of the Great Depression.

Lloyd Mackey, a former Mel Smith lecturer, and author of *Like Father, Like Son*, a book about Ernest and Preston Manning, suggests in the same book that the fundamentalist school that Aberhart and the elder Manning belonged to, the Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute, was in part “a reaction to the social gospel” and of course the modernism that was also sweeping Protestant denominations in the 1910’s and 1920’s. According to Mackey, this school was “skeptical of pastors and teachers who tried to turn the Bible into a tool to address social issues.” They also saw the social gospel, says Mackey, as a capitulation by Christians to the inroads of socialism”, which for some reason was self-evidently thought to be bad., even in its democratic form.

It is beyond the scope of this lecture to do so, but it would be interesting to know more about how the modernist-fundamentalist debate about the Bible effected, and perhaps even trumped in unseen ways, the not necessarily parallel but chronologically simultaneous debate about the practical political expression of Christianity.

At some point Aberhart was introduced to the theories of Major C. H. Douglas, a British teacher who was advocating something called social credit as a solution to the economic disaster of the Great Depression. The theory was based on the notion that the banking system was corrupt and that the role of banks should be bypassed by radical monetary reforms that would see governments able in some circumstances to issue credit, or social credit to be precise, instead of the traditional currency, as a way creating economic activity. Aberhart began to preach social credit alongside and within the sermons he offered on his radio programs and lectures.

To make a long story short, a Social Credit party was formed and in the election of 1935 it won power, over against a United Farmer government that was weakened by allegations of scandal. By the time Ernest Manning had become Premier and was running for re-election in 1944, what was unique about Social Credit had been tried and rejected by the federal government and the courts. Thereafter, as Lloyd Mackey says in his book, Manning managed to persuade his party that statism and class warfare were the real problems and not the banks.

The prairie populism that saw the banks and Central Canada together as the powers that needed to be challenged, was replaced with a party that was quiescent about capitalism

and a cheerleader for a vision of free enterprise and individualism that blended well with a theology of focusing on individual salvation. Religion was something separate from politics, except in so far as it might produce ethical people to take their place in the dominant world order, or successful people whose success was, in the spirit of John Calvin, thought to be a sign of God's favour..

The attitude towards Central Canada would lie low until the National Energy Program revived it and helped to create the western Canadian alienation that helped create the Reform Party. Here I can't help but raise the question of why it seems alright to act in the world, in the horizontal dimension, on behalf of perceived fairness for a region, or an industry, like the oil and gas industry, but acting on behalf of the poor, or the working class, or the environment in some cases, is seen as an inappropriate focus that reveals a relationship with God that needs more attention to the vertical.

Looking at the current government as an emanation of this tradition, it would seem that loyalty to regional interests is stronger than any other belief, including the aversion to so-called statism, unless its only democratically accountable Canadian statism or Canadian public ownership that is to be avoided. Having more and more of our energy sector owned by foreign, and even undemocratic state interests is just fine as long as it comes with the needed investment dollars. PetroCanada. Never. PetroChina. Roll out the red carpet.

In the meantime, also in western Canada, but not only there, there was the social gospel movement. The social gospel, like the evangelical movement, was not a homogenous movement, but it was united around the view, as Richard Allen put it in his classic work on the social gospel, *The Social Passion*, that whatever else might be the case, Christianity was a social religion concerned with the quality of human relations on this earth, in the here and now. The social gospel held that God was as concerned about the world as he was about individuals, and that His concern for the world was a manifestation of His love for humanity, individually and collectively. For God so loved the world. They will be done on earth. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Seek the welfare of the city you are in. Love thy neighbour as thyself.

J.S. Woodsworth's book *My Neighbour*, was his way of asking the ruling economic elite of Winnipeg, gathered in their splendid churches on the right side of the tracks, to imagine the immigrants on the wrong side of the tracks as their neighbour, instead of a labour force to exploit. As Ian McKay says in his book *Reasoning Otherwise*,

“To many people the realities of life in an individualistic, capitalistic order, and the ethics of Christ and His followers, no matter how flexibly interpreted, revealed a major contradiction.”

Indeed, the view was that capitalism necessarily required “the systemic violation of Christian ethics, not least because capitalism necessitated regarding other human beings, and particularly workers, as things or commodities rather than the valued children of God that they actually were, and definitely required that you treat people differently than you

wanted to be treated yourself. Many saw socialism as applied Christianity. Others were not necessarily fully socialist, but advocated various social reforms that would have the effect of regulating the market and compensating for the worst outcomes of capitalism.

The mix of politics and religion on the left made for ways of speaking that would be easily misunderstood today. If these days someone said they belonged to something called the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order, I believe most Canadians would assume such an FCSO to be some kind of right-wing Christian organization. But the FCSO was a social gospel group of distinguished academics who wanted to Christianize the social and economic order by introducing policies based on the mutuality and solidarity with the oppressed that they found witnessed to in the teachings of the Hebrew prophets and Christ Himself.

This lecture is not the place to be able to go into the many details of the social gospel. Suffices for my purpose here today to note that Canadian social gospellers, of various kinds, were a major force in the creation of the CCF in 1933, and later the NDP, and that the CCF and the NDP were instrumental in the politics that created a mixed economy and the modern welfare state, which in the context of the post-Second World War era saw a Canada that was less and less unequal and more socially just, even though, unfortunately, aboriginal Canadians were not part of the success story. In this era, the left and right came to terms with a compromise that saw capitalism tamed in the name of the common good, by national governments that had much more power than they, by design, have today.

In this same era, speaking broadly, the evangelical movement was content to stay out of politics and the public sphere, relying by default on old-line Protestant and Catholic communities to play the role of public religion, as Brian Stiller, former President of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada observes in his book *Tower of Babel to Parliament Hill*. He attributes this attitude largely to a combination of a self-imposed isolation brought on by the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, the influence of pre-millennialism and dispensationalism, and evangelical shunning of universities, out of a suspicion of places that harbored theological liberals.

What happened? At least two things that I want to point to in this context, but unfortunately not in the fulsome way that the topics deserve. Libraries are full of books seeking to chronicle and explain them.

The first might be described as the backlash from corporate Canada and the wealthy against the sharing, through progressive taxation and decent wages, that made the growing social equality of the fifties and sixties possible, through the combination of both a higher personal and social wage. The early seventies, for lack of a more precise date, see the beginning of this backlash, a trend that culminated in the neo-conservative economics of the Reagan-Thatcher-Mulroney era of free trade, privatization, and deregulation, whereby, so went the narrative, the market was freed to deliver the goods, so to speak. Otherwise legitimate insights into the limits of the welfare state were employed to discredit the entire paradigm that had accompanied it, and we witnessed an

ideological Jurassic Park where views thought to be long past believing came out of hiding. So powerful was this political movement led from the top that it also became the Clinton-Blair-Chretien agenda.

The second thing that happened, that reached new heights of visibility in the early seventies, was the breakdown of the moral consensus or agreement on the boundaries within which the pursuit of individual good or individual self-fulfillment could take place within the liberal democratic state. What Charles Taylor, in his book *Varieties of Religion Today*, calls expressive individualism, or even expressive spirituality, and soft relativism came to be seen by some as a development that needed to be turned back.

In the view of the evangelical community, again broadly speaking, I think it fair to say that the mainstream Protestant churches were not seen to be stoutly defending the now eroding paradigm, and they felt a call to do something about that. This would have consequences, not just politically but also for the larger church community as conservative churches grew precisely because, rightly or wrongly, they provided definitive answers to questions that were treated as topics for debate in the mainline churches.

The evangelical return to the world, and to the world of politics in particular, put an end in some ways to the view, often expressed from the political right and centre, that religion and politics should not be mixed, something that was not an uncommon critical response to the mixing of politics and religion on the left. What was good for the right, was also good for the left. Except of course when you wanted a faith perspective to inform how we organize our economic life, which of course is the real offence. The boundaries of the moral must be kept from encompassing the economic realm.

The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops found this out after their New Year's Day statement on the economic crisis, when they proclaimed that the needs of the poor had priority over the wants of the rich, and that the rights of workers were more important than the maximization of profits. They were told by Pierre Trudeau to mind their own business. Which one might argue they increasingly did as divisions between them and the mainline churches over the aforementioned moral consensus fragmented the ecumenical unity that had been characteristic of the seventies around issues of economic justice, international development, human rights, and peace, to name a just a few of the issues that led to at least a dozen ecumenical coalitions. As time went on the Catholic community converged more and more with the evangelical community around issues in what came to be called the culture wars, as what were called family values trumped issues of peace and justice.

Thus began in various forms, in the late seventies, what came to be symbolized politically for so many years, in America in particular, by Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority. But unlike the influence that evangelical voters in America had as early as 1976 when they backed Jimmy Carter, and then, disappointed in him, went over to the Republicans for a generation, the smaller evangelical community in Canada would not be visible in the same way until the late eighties and early nineties when it came to be seen as a major

component of the Reform Party, which caught a wave of regional alienation symbolized by the CF-18 decision, a wave of populist anti-Ottawa feeling brought on by constitutional gridlock, and the already existing wave of unhappiness on the part of some Canadians about the changing moral consensus, including a focus on the perception that the justice system was too permissive. It is likely that moral indignation alone, without the regional and constitutional additions, would not have been enough to launch a new political reality.

The end result, for lack of time to detail it any further, in America and Canada, was a big portion of the evangelical community being recruited, primarily on the basis of their anxiety about the breakdown of the traditional moral consensus, into a political right that itself was engaged, ironically, in breaking down the economic moral consensus that post-war capitalism had operated within for decades, a consensus that though far from perfect was morally superior to what replaced it, and it is the captivity to this new amoral economic consensus that has resulted from the alliance between the religious and the political right that I think should be of great concern to the religious in that alliance.

The only evangelical on the established religious and political right who saw that this was problematic, in America at least, was Pat Buchanan, who in his book *Where the Right Went Wrong*, lambastes the free trade agenda as the unjust selling out of working and middle class America in language that could have been lifted out of an NDP policy statement, all the while I might add coming to some very different conclusions about the whole global context. As far as I know, there is no Canadian Buchanan, or Canadian Rick Warren for that matter, the evangelical pastor who offered a prayer at the inauguration of Barack Obama .

The free market fundamentalism and capitalist triumphalism that has characterized the neo-conservative era has been an occasion for idolatry, and the injustice of greater and greater inequality. What is unfortunate is that perhaps with the best intentions, and with their minds fixed on other issues, this development, or those who engineered it, have been cheered on politically by many in the Christian community. The problem as I see it is not just that an omnipotent free market ethic creates and exaggerates inequality. The problem is also that this market mentality is a reductionist way of thinking that should be of concern to Christians.

The market, which used to know its place, which used to be kept in its place, and which is always debatable as to its appropriate scope and nature, is one thing, but the marketization of reality, the a priori assumption in favor of the market approach, is quite another. Many would argue that the market mentality subversively but inexorably eats away at the moral framework that is so necessary to healthy human relationships. Everything is a contract, an exchange, with individual self-fulfillment as the bottom line. It is ironic that the not uncommon critique of materialism, consumerism, instant gratification, and the pursuit of pleasure above all else, that one finds in books like Stiller's, and surely many evangelical sermons, stimulates little reflection as to how these very things are part and parcel of a world dominated by the ethos of the market.

In my view, the way the market was elevated by neo-conservative politics from one false god among many in the human pantheon that it used to be, to the pre-eminent false god of the corresponding era of globalization and free trade, is an open and shut case of idolatry. When we act as if the market exists and acts outside of our collective acquiescence to it, or worship of it, as the case may be, it is the false image of what it means to be human, graven on the face of our understanding of political economy. The false image is that competition is the law that rules humanity, instead of the law of love, God's law of love.

The very nature of idolatry is humans granting god-like powers or status to something that they themselves have made, and then forgetting that those god-like powers are not independent or objective, but derive from the powers humans themselves grant. When we deny our own participation in reality, and treat the market as if it is not a human creation that can be changed, modified, regulated, or even eliminated where necessary, as we have done with access to basic health care for example, we are forgetting that it is we ourselves who melted the gold to make this particular golden calf.

From a Christian standpoint, it seems to me that the question is obvious. Is Jesus Lord, or is the market, and if the answer is Jesus, then Christians at least have to argue for a way of regarding the market that puts it in its place. The global order being brought into being by the WTO, an order that doesn't even recognize let alone enforce core labour standards and prohibitions of child or slave labour, while being very strict about protecting the property rights of powerful corporations, is a perverse moral hierarchy that should be of urgent concern to all who confess Jesus as Lord. Do we have a global economy organized for the benefit of Dives or Lazarus. To ask the question is to answer it. And this makes it difficult for Christians, regardless of their personal ethics, to act with ethical comfort in such a world.

As a prominent Canadian Christian business person once said in a speech to the Mennonite Economic Development Association, the problem is not that there are no good people or responsible companies.

“The reality is that these kinds of people do not run the world anymore. The driving force in the world has become financial and the connection between the decision maker and the persons and communities that are impacted has been cut.”

Lamenting the absence of such relationships, and the replacement of whatever moral dimension with an amoral dimension, he goes on to say.

“Many voices argue that the unseen hand of the marketplace will result in a better outcome than the heavy hand of government, or any other countervailing force. The problem is that a marketplace dominated by derivatives, hedge funds, and short sellers is hardly the market described by Adam Smith.”

The speech ends with the view that individual Christians can act responsibly within a limited realm, creating a few “holy corners” as he calls them, but futile corners nonetheless unless structural questions about power and decision making are addressed in such a way as to challenge what he called “the economic currents that are divorcing morality from the marketplace.”

The speech was given in 1998, ten years before the 2008 meltdown, and the divorce between morality and the marketplace has not abated. Yet during that time many Christians, particularly in North America, gave comfort and aid to those in politics who not only never uttered a critical word about the marketplace, they actually kept singing its praises.

A time of great idolatry was, not surprisingly, a time of great injustice, as inequality grew in leaps and bounds. I will cite just a few statistics. The evidence is overwhelming. Even a person like David Frum, former speech writer for George Bush, and right-wing commentator, admitted in an interview on CBC just a week or so ago that economic inequality has reached totally objectionable proportions in America, but that, arguably, unlike previous era, the rich just seem not to care. In Canada, from 1980 to 2005, for example, the earnings of the top 20 percent rose by 16.4%, while middle incomes stagnated, and the poor actually made less. In America, the average CEO in 1980 made 42 times the average income. By 2004 it was 458 times.

The reaction to inequality in an earlier time was to intervene in the failed marketplace and put things back on track to serving the well being of all. This was done, and over time a more just society was created. The reaction this time in far too many circles is if the market fails, it can't be the market, it must be government, so lets have less government and more market and all will be well. This had all the hallmarks of eyes that will not see, of a false god whose failure must be rationalized, instead of the insight offered by J.Philip Wogaman, a past-president of the American Society of Christian Ethics, when he said in his book *The Great Economic Debate*, "In sum, the miraculous market mechanism may be a good servant, but it is almost certainly a bad master."

What is mysterious to me is why this combination of idolatry, inequality, and injustice, gets off so easy from many who claim the biblical lens as that through which they see the world, and why so many were enlisted to help make it happen. I can't imagine Jesus signing up for such a cause. It would be as if He had told the rich man that what he needed was a tax cut, or that the magnificat of Mary promised to bail out the mighty, and keep them on their thrones.

Is there any hope, then, for a time when Christians, who might still debate with each other a number of other issues, could unite in prophetic criticism of the way the global economy now works, and of the principles or lack thereof that support it. Before I came here this week I had hoped to get a copy of the recently published book, *The New Evangelicals – Expanding the Vision of the Common Good*, written and researched by a person named Marcia Pally. From what I have read about it, the book identifies a shift in the political culture of evangelicals in the United States. Pally, who spent seven years visiting churches in California to tiny rural congregations in the deep south, claims that when she was doing her field work she could not find a church that was NOT doing and environmental or economic justice project.

On the basis of much less research, I came to a similar hope, if not conclusion, several years ago, about the evangelical community in Canada, that it was, in effect, possibly the spiritual capital of a new social gospel movement. I remember saying this to the assembled conservative crowd on that evening in Ottawa that I spoke about at the beginning of my talk, and it was reinforced for me as younger members of the audience spoke to me afterwards about how much they appreciated hearing about how faith and politics could be understood differently from what they were used to.

As a new generation of evangelical Christians focuses on questions of poverty or of the environment, as they move from questions of charity and individual environmental responsibility to the advocacy of justice and long term sustainability for the sake of future generations, realizing that the market is incapable of taking future generations into account, they will have stepped into the social gospel, whether they call it that or not.

Another sign of hope are the teachings of Pope Benedict on the global economy. As I said in the article that I wrote for the first issue of *Convivium*, passages in the 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* seem to take dead aim at free market fundamentalism. The Pope says, for example, while calling for the strengthening of unions and lamenting the downsizing of social security systems, that

“the conviction that the economy must be autonomous, that it must be shielded from influences of a moral character, has led man to abuse the economic process in a thoroughly destructive way.”

Another source of hope would be a re-emergent Christian left, after years of low profile, a low profile due in part to the overwhelming political and media narrative about the religious right, but also to a deference to secularism and pluralism that went beyond what was appropriate. This was part of a vicious circle created when some elements of the religious right are felt to be such a discredit to religion in the public realm that others hide their faith under a bushel when they actually need to let it shine.

Whatever sources of hope come together to create the ingredients of a future gospel, and a future for the social gospel, created perhaps out of the convergence of a more broadly politically engaged evangelical community, a rediscovery of Catholic interest in economic teaching, and a re-emergent Christian left, any new social gospel will be different than the social gospel of the 1930's, or the 70's, or even the older social gospel of the Hebrew prophets. The social gospel of the future will not be able, in the near future at least, to take a certain affinity with, or knowledge of, its religious tradition. Both Aberhart and Woodsworth, Douglas and Manning, could assume a certain biblical literacy and public affinity when making their faith based pitches to what was in their view a wayward Christendom that needed to better heed its own message.

Yet to say that any new social gospel will take shape in a post-Christendom context, is not to say that it will take develop in a post-religious context. Despite a renewal of militant atheism on the part of Christopher Hitchens and the like, it is pretty clear that God has survived the secularization narrative. Indeed, a casual look at book titles from

God is Back to God's Century, the 21<sup>st</sup> that is, points to the ongoing and resurgent reality of religion as a component of the political that we are arguably ill prepared to deal with, as religion has for so long been the elephant in the room that many did not want to acknowledge as such.

It is also arguable that as the Christian centre of gravity geographically and demographically shifts from the global north to the global south, and in so far as the remedies for injustice will now often have to be global rather than national, the future of the social gospel, in so far as it overlaps with liberation theologies, may well lie quite outside its original western locations. As Philip Jenkins says in his recent book, *The Next Christendom-The Coming of Global Christianity*, whereas in 1900, 83% of Christians were lived in Europe and North America, by 2050, 72% will live in Africa, Asia and Latin America, places where as he also says," the politics of religion are very much alive."

Any future social gospel will be one in which Christians work with people from other faiths who also see the need for an alternative to the prevailing paradigm, and in solidarity with agnostics and atheists who share their goals. Yet when speaking of and to itself, and to the world, it will face the challenge of finding the ability to speak normatively , to use moral language, persuasively but not authoritatively, in a context where moral language has come to be associated with intolerance.

Finding the right tone in the post-Christendom, secularist, pluralist environment is a challenge. It may well be found as Christians do the necessary work of learning how to talk to each other better, as a prelude to more successfully talking to the world. In so far as my invitation to be with you here tonight is a sign of that work, I hope what I have had to say is helpful.