

Fall 2013

# Reading Addams's 'Democracy and Social Ethics' as a Social Gospel, Evolutionary Idealist Text

Marilyn Fischer

*University of Dayton*, [mfischer1@udayton.edu](mailto:mfischer1@udayton.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl\\_fac\\_pub](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl_fac_pub)



Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#)

---

## eCommons Citation

Fischer, Marilyn, "Reading Addams's 'Democracy and Social Ethics' as a Social Gospel, Evolutionary Idealist Text" (2013). *Philosophy Faculty Publications*. 145.

[https://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl\\_fac\\_pub/145](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl_fac_pub/145)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Philosophy at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact [frice1@udayton.edu](mailto:frice1@udayton.edu), [mschlangen1@udayton.edu](mailto:mschlangen1@udayton.edu).

Reading Addams's *Democracy and Social Ethics* as a Social Gospel, Evolutionary Idealist Text

Marilyn Fischer, Ph.D., University of Dayton

Abstract: Philosophers identify Addams as a pragmatist, while many historians locate her within the social gospel movement. To test this debate, I construct a social gospel reading of *Democracy and Social Ethics*. I compare this reading with the pragmatist reading Charlene Haddock Seigfried gives in her “Introduction” to the text. I identify significant points of overlap between the two readings. Both call for a transition from individual ethics to social ethics; both emphasize experience and perplexity as central to personal and social reconstruction. However, the social gospel reading challenges current pragmatist readings by identifying evolutionary idealism as the text’s structuring theory. This use of evolutionary idealism gives a structural—and troubling—explanation for how and why Addams uses racist language in the text. Pragmatist interpretations have not addressed these issues in a detailed way.

There is a disciplinary divide between philosophers and historians in how they read Addams’s first book, *Democracy and Social Ethics*. Philosophers identify Addams primarily as a pragmatist. They often compare and contrast her thinking with James and Dewey, and find her a fruitful resource for contemporary discussions about gender, social justice, and peace. Much of this scholarship gives central place to Addams’s first book, *Democracy and Social Ethics*. Except for nods to her 1892 essay, “The Subjective Necessity of Settlements,” philosophers rarely discuss whether her religious sensibilities influenced her theorizing.<sup>1</sup> While historians debate Addams’s religious identity, many locate her within the social gospel movement (Dorrien 175-85; Stebner 102-103; Edwards 151-57). Intellectual historian Gary Dorrien, one of the most highly regarded scholars in his field, fully acknowledges Addams’s pragmatism. Yet he

maintains that in *Democracy and Social Ethics*, “Addams held fast to a social gospel rendering of the good.” He places her in “the secularizing stream of the social gospel” (176, 185).

Here I will explore, not whether Addams herself was a social gospeler, but whether, following Dorrien’s claim, *Democracy and Social Ethics* can plausibly be read as a social gospel text. While Dorrien gives a summary of the text, he does not provide a close textual analysis (175-77). To develop such an analysis, I will place *Democracy and Social Ethics* within a social gospel community of discourse, and note where it shares conceptual structures and rhetorical tropes with other social gospel texts. In 1899 Addams gave a series of lectures as a University of Chicago extension course, and based *Democracy and Social Ethics* on those lectures. She provided a reading list of recommended books to accompany the lectures (“Bibliography”). Using this list I will construct a reading of *Democracy and Social Ethics* that someone in the social gospel community of discourse could have made in 1902, when the book was published.<sup>2</sup> I compare this reading with the reading Charlene Haddock Seigfried gives in the “Introduction” to the University of Illinois’s reprint edition of the text. Her reading is a thoroughly pragmatist, sophisticated, and secular analysis.

This study will show that a social gospel reading of *Democracy and Social Ethics* is highly plausible. While the two readings overlap, the social gospel reading challenges current pragmatist readings in two respects. First, it identifies evolutionary idealism as the structuring theory of the text. Second, this use of evolutionary idealism gives a structural—and troubling—explanation for how and why Addams uses what some scholars consider as racist language in the text. Pragmatist interpretations have not addressed these issues in a detailed way.

Addams uses little explicitly religious language in *Democracy and Social Ethics*, but what she does use goes to the heart of social gospel theology. After a brief description of the

social gospel movement, I will organize the paper using three passages where Addams employs religious language. I will explain how social gospelers would understand these passages' significance, and how they would use them to explicate key organizing concepts, specifically individual morality and social morality, experience, and perplexities.

### **Did ye visit the poor...**

The social gospel, a movement within liberal Christianity, was most prominent between the Civil War and World War I. It grew in response to rapid industrialization and the rise of labor movements. Its theology focused on Jesus's life and teachings, particularly on his call to care for the poor and marginalized (Dorrien 10, 26, 69-70). Social gospelers were highly critical of laissez-faire capitalism. Some wanted to replace capitalist economic structures with cooperatives; some were Christian socialists (Dorrien 25). They called for the reconstruction of basic economic and social institutions, claiming that Christian benevolence toward individuals was inadequate to this task.<sup>3</sup> Dorrien defines social ethics as the academic arm of the social gospel movement, a discipline that combined Christian ethics with social science. When he describes Addams as "an incisive thinker who made an important contribution to social ethics," this is the context he has in mind (6-7, 169).

Addams's first use of religious language comes in her Introduction's fifth paragraph, where she writes, "The one test which the most authoritative and dramatic portrayal of the Day of Judgment offers, is the social test. The stern questions are not in regard to personal and family relations, but did ye visit the poor, the criminal, the sick, and did ye feed the hungry?" (*Democracy* 6). Social gospelers would read this passage as a signal that Addams was speaking their language. For many social gospelers, Jesus's two commandments—to love God and to love

one's neighbors—are at the heart of the gospel. They interpreted loving one's neighbor in terms of how one treats those at the social margins.

In the paragraph immediately preceding this religious reference, Addams introduces the book's key organizing concepts. She writes, "To attain individual morality in an age demanding social morality, to pride one's self on the results of personal effort when the time demands social adjustment, is utterly to fail to apprehend the situation" (*Democracy* 6). Seigfried presents *Democracy and Social Ethics* as Addams's argument that individual codes of ethics are inadequate and need to be replaced with a through-going social morality. The chapters give a series of highly contextualized vignettes, showing the perplexities people face in trying to move from an individual to a social code of ethics (Seigfried xiv, xxii, xxvi-xxxi). Seigfried describes individual morality in terms of conventional moral standards and classical liberal theory, with its emphasis on individual autonomy and natural rights (xv-xvi, xxxi). She explains how social ethics reflects human interdependence and the inherently social nature of the self. Seigfried draws out the implications for Addams: social ethics requires the transformation of social institutions through cooperative, collective actions that utilize scientific, experimental methods (xv-xix). The outcome will be a society in which persons, individually and collectively, can flourish.

In making their case for social reconstruction, social gospelers also placed the distinction between individual ethics and social ethics at the heart of their analyses. They also called for the use of scientific methods and for a social conception of the self. Economist Richard Ely was editor of the Macmillan series that published *Democracy and Social Ethics*. His book, *The Labor Movement in America*, was on Addams's bibliography list. Ely mapped academic disciplines onto Jesus's two commandments. Theology dealt with the commandment to love God, and the

social sciences investigated how to fulfill the commandment to love one's neighbor (*Labor* 331; *Social* 9-10). Individual ethics, Ely writes, is an "older tendency" that emphasizes personal moral excellence, that is, acquiring and acting on personal virtues toward one's family and associates. The fallacy of this view, he claims, is that it ignores how society is a social organism; persons are intricately interdependent. Ely understands social ethics as the ethical component of the social sciences (*Social* 127-130). He was one of the founders of the American Economic Association, and explained the association's purpose in social gospel terms: "We who have resolved to form an American Economics Association hope to do something toward the developing of a system of social ethics. We wish to accomplish certain practical results in the social and financial world . . . believing that our work lies in the direction of practical Christianity" (quoted in Dorrien 18).

Philosophers often use James to articulate the social character of the self. James's *Talks to Teachers* was on Addams's bibliography list, but social gospelers might have turned to someone closer to their own circle for a description of the social self. Helen Bosanquet's essay, "The Psychology of Social Progress," was also on the list. A leader in the British Charity Organization Society, Bosanquet describes how the self enlarges through expanding its range of activities and social engagement, leading to "a wider self" (131-32).<sup>4</sup>

Social gospelier George Herron taught applied Christianity at Iowa College (later renamed Grinnell College). He invited Addams to give lectures there in 1898; lectures she revised for her University of Chicago extension course (Knight, 397-98). His book, *Between Caesar and Jesus*, was on Addams's bibliography list. Herron makes the same distinction Addams and Ely make between individual and social ethics, although his description is cast in religious terms. Herron thinks that to aim at "individual perfection" is "a profound spiritual selfishness, an inverted egoism" (54). Addams makes a similar observation, though her tone is less accusatory

(*Democracy* 119-120). To Herron, there is no individual salvation, apart from social salvation. As members of the social organism, Christians have the duty to keep the social organism healthy (45-46). Herron is explicit about what this means for an individual's responsibilities toward social reconstruction. "The salvation of a Chicago man's soul may depend upon his attitude toward the subject of municipal franchises, or toward the tax-assessments of railway property; while his church and his prayers may literally have no more to do with his soul than the geology of the moon" (59-60).

Thus, Herron and Ely associate individual ethics with the wholly inadequate attempt to fulfill one's Christian duty through cultivating one's own virtues. They view social ethics as spelling out how the commandment to love one's neighbor requires the reconstruction of social institutions. They projected, as Addams did, that with this social transformation, individuals will be able to develop their full capacities and flourish, in association with and in the service of all others (Ely *Labor* 3; Herron 17). Social gospelers reading *Democracy and Social Ethics* would find that Addams organized her book with the same basic distinctions and concepts they used, albeit with less explicitly religious language.

### **St. Francis and Evolutionary Idealism**

Addams's chapter on "Filial Relations" examines the case of educated young adult women who want to respond to the social claim and meet the social test. Their parents, though, think their daughters' moral duties are bounded by the family sphere. Social gospelers would note the explicitly religious analogy Addams uses to exemplify the daughters' situation. When St. Francis of Assisi, "the most tender and loving of men," wanted to leave his family in response to the social claim, his father was violently opposed. Addams writes that St. Francis responded

by “dramatically renouncing his filial allegiance, and formally subjecting the narrow family claim to the wider and more universal duty” (*Democracy* 38-39). He was not simply opposing his father. Instead, he was responding to a wider movement, to “a power . . . [that was] part of the religious revival which swept Europe from end to end in the early part of the thirteenth century” (*Democracy* 39).

Addams wasn't the first to tell St. Francis's story this way. Social gospeler Vida Scudder had earlier described St. Francis as responding to a wider spiritual impulse in *Social Ideals in English Letters*, a book Addams admired and included on her bibliography list (Scudder 14; Addams, “Letter”). Scudder was an English professor at Wellesley College, a founder of the College Settlement Association, and a Christian socialist (Lindley 76-78). Addams's *Democracy and Social Ethics* and Scudder's *Social Ideals in English Letters* both use the same evolutionary paradigm and both employ many of the same literary tropes and devices.

Scudder uses nineteenth-century Victorian literature to illustrate the temporal relationship between individual and social morality, casting this relationship within a Christian sensibility. Taken chronologically, works of Victorian literature reveal “the gradual awakening of a social consciousness.” What are being awakened are Christian ideals of social equality and loving fellowship (Scudder 5, 13). Charles Dickens's early Victorian novels correspond to individual morality, which Scudder associates with the individualistic phase of the growth of democracy. They reveal the wretched conditions of the poor in a commercial, industrial society and that society's spiritual emptiness. Virtuous characters in his novels extend their benevolence to needy individuals, but Dickens is silent about the need for fundamental social reform (Scudder 142). Scudder comments that while early Victorian novels lacked a social theory, they did reflect “the



slow advance of a great idea. A mighty struggle for social salvation, not yet fully in evidence, but inexorably preparing, lies behind all incidents of modern life and art” (126-27).

Scudder gives George Eliot’s novels the important transitional role of showing how this awakening social consciousness was working within individuals’ lives. Eliot was a particular favorite of Addams (Knight 93, 102, 110, 141). Eliot’s characters, as Scudder presents them, resemble Addams’s characters. The charity visitor can be seen as a blend of Eliot’s Dorothea and Daniel Deronda. Dorothea of *Middlemarch* is “sweet and bewildered.” She craves fellowship, and “suffers with atoning pain for the sorrows of the world. . . . Her power has not yet changed from impulse to purpose” (Scudder 86-87). Daniel Deronda has advanced beyond Dorothea. Scudder comments, “The impulse to compassion and to service, helplessly astir in Dorothea, is in [Deronda] both dominant and enlightened” (190). We can position Addams’s charity visitor halfway between Dorothea and Daniel. She has Dorothea’s sensitivities and Deronda’s persistence, but she cannot work all the way through the tangle of perplexities.

Subsequent Victorian authors, including John Ruskin, revealed a new social vision, “a radiant vision of a spiritual democracy” (Scudder 176). Ruskin was especially influential on the social settlement movement (Carson 2-10). Scudder reads Ruskin as revealing how the awakening moral consciousness had awakened even further. She writes that Ruskin thought it is a Christian responsibility to bring this new social morality into modern industrial society. “He discovered a new field—the field of distinctly social ethics” (217-18). Phrases from Ruskin show up unannounced in *Democracy and Social Ethics*, and Ruskin provided the pattern for Addams’s recommendations for workers’ education in the book’s chapter on “Educational Methods” (*Democracy* 92-97).<sup>5</sup>

Scudder's idealist framework shines through. She describes the awakening social consciousness as a moving force animating individuals and society. It gradually strengthens, works through contradictions, and will at some point reach fruition. *Democracy and Social Ethics* contains many clues that Addams is working from the same evolutionary, idealist paradigm. Edward Caird's *The Evolution of Religion*, the second book on Addams's bibliography list, gives the version of idealism she uses. Caird was especially important to Addams. She visited him in Oxford in 1896 and writes in *Twenty Years at Hull House* that his book had given her "unspeakable comfort" in sorting through her immigrant neighbors' vast range of ethical and religious practices and ideas (Knight, 357, 367-71; Addams, *Twenty* 24.)

Edward Caird was a Scottish idealist, and colleague of T.H. Green. In *The Evolution of Religion* Caird places Hegelian idealism within an evolutionary trajectory. He is seeking "the one principle of life which masks itself in all these various forms, and which through them all is striving towards the complete realization of itself" (Vol. I, 35). This one principle of life is a spiritual impulse (Vol. I, 14). The story of this impulse's growth is the story of the evolution of religion and of the development through history of humans' moral and religious consciousness, the highest form that mind can achieve (Vol. I, 7-9).

Caird states that he employs scientific method by using two basic principles: the idea of the unity of mankind, and the principle of development (Vol. I, 15, 23-24). While these principles have been operating throughout human history, they have only recently come into human consciousness, i.e., it is only recently that people have been able to articulate them and use them deliberately to trace religion's evolution (Vol. I, 21, 9-10, 16). The first principle is the idea of the "unity of mankind" (sic). Caird explains that throughout human history the enormous diversity of cultures, moralities, and religions all developed in response to and as expressions of

this spiritual impulse (Vol. I, 25). Now, in the late nineteenth century, Caird asserts, we can see that differences between persons and social groups are of secondary importance. “The fundamental fact of self-consciousness” unites all of humanity (Vol. I, 15). Each person’s soul is of infinite worth, and this confirms that what is best and highest in humanity is common to each member of the human race (Vol. I, 16, 18-19).

To organize the apparent miscellany of cultural facts so as to see the unity of mankind, Caird brings in the principle of development, which he calls “the great reconciling principle” (Vol. I, ix). Using this principle we can place the range of cultures and moral and religious practices into evolutionary order, and show the organic emergence of later stages from earlier ones (Vol. I, 21, 25). Human thought itself develops as mind confronts cultural facts, which serve as “nutriment” for its growth. In trying to understand these facts, mind expands and deepens. Facts and ideas are thus warp and woof, “continually being woven together into the web of man’s intellectual life” (Vol. I, 11, 10). The evolution of the two principles and of religion itself is not smooth or uniform, but progresses in Hegelian fashion, through conflicts, oppositions and resolutions.

With these principles of unity and development we can bridge the gulf between the earliest humans and ourselves, stretching our intellects and our sympathies across that bridge until we will not “count anything human [to be] alien” (Vol. I, 25, 19). Knowing this history, and stretching our sympathies across this gulf enables us to know and understand our own inner lives, as well. Caird writes, “We learn to know ourselves . . . in the mirror of the world,” and to see the value of our lives “in the contribution they make, in turn, to the growing life of humanity” (Vol. I, 27, 28). Seigfried rightly stresses the essential role sympathetic understanding plays in Addams’s theorizing, explaining its role in counteracting power imbalances and

enabling those who are more privileged to hear the voices of the oppressed (xxi). Sympathetic understanding also figures in Caird. It enables those at more advanced stages of moral evolution to recognize kinship with those at earlier stages.

Seigfried places special emphasis on two themes: experience and perplexity. She places Addams's discussion of experience's contribution to morality in conversation with Dewey, Tufts, and James. Experience for Addams is transactive between self and world, and is experimental. Experience with diverse peoples and conditions are particularly valuable for testing and revising one's own ethical principles and sensitivities (xvi-xx). Seigfried appreciates Addams's stunning statement, "Already there is a conviction that we are under a moral obligation in choosing our experiences, since the result of those experiences must ultimately determine our understanding of life" (Seigfried xix; Addams, *Democracy* 8).

Social gospelers reading this passage would place Addams in Scudder and Caird's discourse community rather than with James and Dewey. Caird writes, "It is undoubtedly in and through experience that all our knowledge comes" (Vol. I, 10). Using idealist language, he expresses the same ideas as Addams expresses in the passage quoted above. He elaborates, "For the inner life of the individual is deep and full, just in proportion to the width of his relations to other men and things; and his consciousness of what he is in himself as a spiritual being is dependent on a comprehension of the position of his individual life in the great secular process by which the intellectual and moral life of humanity has grown and is growing" (Vol. I, 29-30). This statement contains the transactive character of experience and the value of diverse experiences as conditions for one's own intellectual and spiritual growth. Through widening one's interactions with the world's inhabitants, one's own "understanding of life," as Addams put it, also undergoes growth.

The second theme Seigfried stresses is perplexity, which provides a focal point for each chapter (xxiii). *Democracy and Social Ethics* contains a series of case studies of people in morally perplexing situations. These perplexities signal how individual ethics' conventionally accepted moral practices are inadequate for resolving the given situations. Moral growth comes when one uses these perplexing situations to move toward social morality. Emotion and sympathy as well as intellectual reflection are all engaged. Again, Seigfried uses Dewey and James to enrich her discussion of Addams's use of perplexities (xxiii-xxv). Caird also identifies perplexities as the occasions for moral growth. He writes, "And the difficulty and perplexity which is occasioned by the unity and the difference of these elements is the moving principle of development from the very dawn of intelligence" (Vol. I, 69-70). Thus, both pragmatist and idealist readings of *Democracy and Social Ethics* give central place to experience and perplexity. The difference comes with Caird's idealism. For Caird, the process of growth through perplexities and experience is the process by which the spiritual impulse works its way through human history.

Ely and Herron's social gospel writings contain echoes of Caird's idealism. They agree with Caird that Jesus was the living embodiment of the ideal (Ely, *Labor* 312-13, Caird Vol. II 151, Herron 182). Herron considered Jesus a living dramatization of the highest ideals, a foretaste of what would later be realized in a society of social ethics (50-51, 182-83). Ely defines human progress as a long evolution through which ethical ideas are extended until all the peoples of the earth are included within one circle (*Labor* 312). While Seigfried acknowledges that pragmatists, including Addams, used evolutionary theory, she presents individual morality and social morality as alternative ethical stances. She discusses how a shift needs to be made as

social conditions change, but her account does not have the internal directional drive that is present in Addams's account and very clear in accounts by Scudder, Caird, Ely and Herron. To show the directional force of the spiritual impulse in *Democracy and Social Ethics*, they would point to passages such as the following, which I place in italics.

In "Charitable Effort" Addams describes the charity visitor's perplexity when she realizes how different her middle-class community's moral standards are from those of impoverished immigrants. She writes, "if [the charity visitor] is sensitive at all, [she] is never free from perplexities *which our growing democracy forces upon her*" (*Democracy* 31). Addams explains people's distaste for earlier methods of charity, noting, "But all this happened *before science had become evolutionary and scientific at all, before it had a principle of life from within*" (*Democracy* 31-32). In "Industrial Amelioration," she places efforts by unions and employers to share the profits within a larger context. "Outside of and surrounding these smaller and most significant efforts are *the larger and irresistible movements operating toward combination*" (*Democracy* 72). In "Educational Methods" Addams calls for educators to help release "*the dynamic power residing in the mass of men.*" She then states, "*We believe that man's moral idealism is the constructive force of progress*" (*Democracy* 80). These phrases: "principle of life from within", "larger and irresistible movements", "dynamic power," and "man's moral idealism" would stand out prominently to social gospel readers, and signal Addams's reliance on evolutionary idealism as the paradigm that frames her analysis in *Democracy and Social Ethics*.

A number of philosophers have expressed concern over what they interpret as occasional uses of racist language in Addams's descriptions of her immigrant neighbors. They attribute this to implicit racism or as simply reflecting common, prejudicial vocabulary of the time. (See Hamington's review of these critiques, 119-125.) They emphasize, though, that Addams's

fundamental approach to others was one of democratic equality, inclusive pluralism, and sympathetic understanding.

However, when we investigate more closely how Addams describes her immigrant neighbors' ethics, we find more evidence that her theorizing in *Democracy and Social Ethics* is framed by Caird's evolutionary idealism. There are two chapters where Addams gives detailed descriptions of the ethics practiced by her immigrant neighbors. In "Charitable Effort" she describes her neighbors' ethics as "primitive," and as clashing with the charity visitor's "emerging democratic standard." Addams attributes her neighbors' apparent kindness to each other to the instinct of pity, operative since the early days of human evolution. She writes, "The evolutionists tell us that the instinct to pity, the impulse to aid his fellows, served man at a very early period, as a rude rule of right and wrong. There is no doubt that this rude rule still holds among many people with whom charitable agencies are brought into contact" (*Democracy* 14-15.) That is, her neighbors' ethics are not those of individual or social morality, but belong to an earlier stage of moral progress. Their apparent goodness to each other stemmed from an instinct and not from a sense of justice. Now Addams does say that her neighbor's willingness to sacrifice for the well-being of others was a sign that at least in this respect they were more advanced morally than the charity visitor (*Democracy* 33). Caird would explain this by saying that the spiritual impulse is present in the earliest stages of human evolution, hence people at these stages can exhibit genuine moral sensibilities (Vol. I, 201-202). Using Caird's evolutionary idealism as a frame, Addams can claim that her neighbors' morality is more advanced in terms of pity and self-sacrifice than that of the property owning middle class, while still considering her neighbors to be primitive in terms of the evolutionary stage of their moral sensibilities.

In “Political Reform” Addams analyzes why a corrupt alderman keeps getting re-elected in her Chicago ward.<sup>6</sup> The alderman gave turkeys to Addams’s immigrant neighbors at Christmas, attended funerals, and put many of them on the city payroll (*Democracy* 103, 105, 116). Addams’s neighbors interpret these acts as straightforward acts of kindness, large-scale versions of their own generosity to each other. Addams explains that they are incapable of perceiving the alderman’s corruption as corruption, that is, as violating the abstract principle of justice, because they are incapable of understanding abstract moral ideas. To them, ethics needs to be presented dramatically through personal actions. They “learn only by experience” (*Democracy* 103). Addams explains, “Morality certainly develops far earlier in the form of moral fact than in the form of moral ideas” (*Democracy* 100). Here Addams is drawing on Wilhelm Wundt’s *Ethics: The Facts and Laws of the Moral Life*, the first book on her bibliography list. Wundt’s account of moral evolution is similar to Caird’s. In the early stages of human evolution, Wundt claims, people need to see moral qualities embodied in actual living persons. The ability to form general ethical ideas such as justice, comes later, after a long evolutionary process (32).<sup>7</sup> Addams compares the ethics of her adult neighbors to moral sensitivities of young children—both “long to be good”; neither has the intellectual capacity to comprehend abstract virtue (*Democracy* 101). Here Addams is reflecting a version of the recapitulation theory, found in Caird’s claim that individuals can see their own personal biography writ large in the history of human moral evolution (Vol. I, 27-28).

Addams’s attitude toward her neighbors can still be called sympathetic, but in *Democracy and Social Ethics* Addams’s sympathetic understanding is presented through theoretical lenses coated with Caird’s evolutionary idealism. Thus, acting toward others out of a sense of pity and sympathy is characteristic of early, or “primitive” stages of moral development.



Acting out of a sense of impartiality or justice, comes later. People at the stage of individual ethics are capable of acting on abstract, impartial principles, but have not learned to synthesize abstractions with pity and sympathy. Social ethics represents such a synthesis. Social gospelers would have recognized Addams's reference to the prophet's injunction "to love mercy . . . do justly . . . and walk humbly with God" as a summation of this synthesis (*Democracy* 33-34).

Seeing how evolutionary idealism structures Addams's theorizing gives a way to respond to those who claim that Addams is inconsistent for using racist language while being committed to social democracy. Addams was not inconsistent. Instead, following Caird and Wundt, Addams places her neighbors' ethics at an earlier point on the evolutionary trajectory than where she projects that social ethics will develop. Yes, Addams had genuine sympathy for her neighbors. It functioned, following Caird, to bridge the gap between her own more advanced moral code and their more primitive one. It enabled her to see moral qualities in them that her middle-class peers had failed to retain in their own ethical code. That is, Addams's racist language has a theoretical function and her use of it is evidence that she employs evolutionary idealist theory in *Democracy and Social Ethics*. This analysis is unsettling, more troubling, perhaps, than merely attributing some unconscious racism to Addams. It shows that Addams was fully aware of the language she used, and it was structured into her theorizing.

### **Postmillennial Christianity and "the Last and Great Experience"**

*Democracy and Social Ethics* concludes with language familiar to social gospelers: "The cry of 'Back to the People' is always heard at the same time, when we have the prophet's demand for repentance or the religious cry of 'Back to Christ,' as though we would seek refuge with our fellows and believe in our common experiences as a preparation for a new moral

struggle” (*Democracy* 120). Addams illustrates the last phrase of this quotation by referring to Tolstoy’s short story, “Master and Man.” Caught in a blizzard, the estranged nobleman at last finds peace as he dies, bringing life-giving warmth to his servant’s body. The connection between democracy and a religious portrayal of death as “the last and Great Experience” is clear in the book’s concluding sentence. “Consciously to accept Democracy . . . is to anticipate that peace and freedom” (*Democracy* 120).

How do we understand the book’s final paragraphs and their apparent mysticism? Two phrases would stand out to social gospellers: “as a preparation for a new moral struggle” and “when the last and Great Experience comes.” Many social gospellers were post-millennialists. They believed that the 1000-year reign prophesied in the book of *Revelation* would precede Christ’s return to earth. This 1000-year reign would be a Kingdom of God on earth, what social gospellers were working to bring about (Phillips 5n12). I do not claim that Addams was a post-millennialist, but social gospellers who were would find reasons for reading her that way. Post-millennial strains are present in Herron’s book. He states explicitly that the Kingdom of God refers to a just social and political order on earth (148-49; 191). It was Christians’ responsibility to transform social institutions so as to usher in the Kingdom of God on earth (61-62).

Post-millennial strains in Ely and Scudder shade into versions of Caird’s idealism. Ely and Scudder elide Christianity with democracy, and understand both as together calling for the reconstruction of society in terms of social ethics. To Ely, Christianity meant social ethics, and social ethics meant democracy. He predicted that organized labor would be the force that would lead governments to end war, and lead the peoples of the earth to live together in peace (*Labor* 139). Scudder ends her book by declaring, “With the intellectual impulse toward the reconstruction of social theory, and the practical impulse toward the activity of social service, is

blending more and more a spiritual impulse deeper than either of these, imperatively desiring and seeking the realization of the Kingdom of God on earth” (314). Through this movement democracy and Christianity will coalesce into a just social order. In a statement that anticipates the mysticism of *Democracy and Social Ethics*’ conclusion, Scudder writes, “Belief in democracy is the last demand of idealism. . . . [To] say that the cure for democracy is more democracy requires a reverential trust toward humanity at large such as only the mystic . . . [has] been able to hold with any degree of steadiness” (246).<sup>8</sup> The culmination of religious evolution for Caird reads like an idealist version of the post-millennialist image of the end times. The highest and culminating form of religion, Caird maintains, is Christianity. Like Herron and Ely, Caird calls for social salvation here on earth, a salvation in which all people share cooperatively and communally, in “the great heritage of humanity” (Vol. II, 321-22).

To social gospelers, Ely’s, Scudder’s, Herron’s, and Addams’s books would read like popularized accounts of Caird’s idealism. The social gospelers’ kingdom of God on earth parallels Caird’s projection of the “one principle of life” reaching “complete realization of itself” (Vol. I, n35). Social Gospelers came, for the most part, from the ranks of liberal Protestantism. Many de-emphasized the divinity of Jesus and the redemptive meaning of his death and resurrection; some set these issues aside altogether. These social gospelers would not be uncomfortable or confused by the paucity of explicitly religious language in *Democracy and Social Ethics*. Strategically, Addams had to exercise caution in using Protestant language, living as she did amidst Catholic, Orthodox, and Jewish neighborhoods. Social gospelers would read *Democracy and Social Ethics* as equating democracy with social ethics, endowing both with religious sentiment, and placing them in a progressive evolutionary trajectory moving toward a just, cooperative society dedicated to humanity’s full flowering.

This study has identified significant points of overlap between a pragmatist reading and a social gospel reading of *Democracy and Social Ethics*. Both readings call for a transition from individual ethics to social ethics; both emphasize experience and perplexity as central to personal and social reconstruction. However, reading the text from a social gospel perspective enables us to find a place in Addams's theorizing for passages in the text that pragmatist readings often ignore or find embarrassing. Here I need to emphasize the narrowness of this project's scope. I have not compared the two interpretations in order to claim that one is superior to the other or gives a more adequate reading of the text as a whole. Neither have I assessed whether other elements of Addams's theorizing or her experiences with her neighbors may have mitigated or recast her claim regarding her neighbors' lack of capacity for abstract moral thinking. These are tasks for future work. Nonetheless, the narrowness of the project gives it value. By identifying Addams's use of evolutionary idealism and her assumptions regarding her neighbors' moral capacities, this study reveals aspects of her thought that rub against pragmatist interpretations to date. The challenge for those who read *Democracy and Social Ethics* as a pragmatist text is to address directly Addams's use of evolutionary idealism and its racist assumptions.

#### Endnotes

1. Maurice Hamington is a partial exception. In *The Social Philosophy of Jane Addams* Hamington claims that Addams was a Christian humanist and that Hull House was in effect a civic church. See 166-175.

2. The most well-known and influential social gospel text was *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, by Walter Rauschenbusch. Because it was published in 1907, five years after the publication of *Democracy and Social Ethics*, I do not use it in this paper.
3. Older histories of the Social Gospel focused primarily on white, male Protestant ministers in the movement. More recent accounts argue that many women reformers should be included, including many settlement workers, and other reformers who were prominent in reform circles addressing temperance, child labor, women's labor conditions, and so on. See Edwards and Gifford, "Introduction," 1-5.
4. Older scholarship on the social gospel movement framed it as a uniquely American movement. More recent scholarship has stressed trans-Atlantic connections, particularly between the U.S. and England. See Phillips, *A Kingdom on Earth*.
5. In a passage that pragmatist readers like to quote, Addams asks that we identify "with the common lot which is the essential idea of Democracy . . . going forward as we must in the heat and jostle of the crowd" (9). Here she borrows from Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies*, where he asks the noble if they "jostle with the hungry and common crowd" (17).
6. Although unnamed in this chapter, Addams is reflecting on Hull-House's efforts to unseat the ward alderman, Johnny Powers. See Knight, *Citizen* 364-66, 385-87.
7. In an earlier version of the chapter published in the *International Journal of Ethics*, Addams names and quotes Wundt directly, to support her statement, "Morality certainly develops far earlier in the form of moral fact than in the form of moral ideas." See "Ethical Survivals" 274; Wundt 32.
8. Addams uses the phrase, "that the cure for the ills of Democracy is more Democracy," in *Democracy* (9). Here is a prior use of the term by a social gospel, evolutionary idealist.

## Works Cited

- Addams, Jane. "Bibliography." In *The Jane Addams Papers, 1860-1960*, ed. Mary Lynn McCree Bryan. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1984. Reel 30, Frame 842.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Democracy and Social Ethics*. 1902. Reprint ed. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Ethical Survivals in Municipal Corruption." *International Journal of Ethics* 8:3 (April 1898): 273-291.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Letter to Vida Scudder." Jan. 21, 1899. In *The Jane Addams Papers, 1860-1960*, ed. Mary Lynn McCree Bryan. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1984. Reel 3, Frame 1277.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Subjective Necessity of Settlements." *Philanthropy and Social Progress*. Ed. Henry C. Adams, 1-26. NY: Crowell, 1893.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Twenty Years at Hull House*. 1910. Reprint ed. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1990.
- Bosanquet, Helen Dandy. "The Psychology of Social Progress," in *The Standard of Life and Other Essays*. London: Macmillan, 1899. 114-135.
- Carson, Mina. *Settlement Folk: Social Thought and the American Settlement Movement, 1885-1930*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990.
- Caird, Edward. *The Evolution of Religion, Vol. I & II*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Glasgow: James Maclehose & Sons, 1894.
- Dorrien, Gary. *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- Edwards, R.A.R. "Jane Addams, Walter Rauschenbusch, and Dorothy Day: A Comparative Study of Settlement Theology." *Gender and the Social Gospel*. Eds. Wendy J.

- Deichmann Edwards and Carolyn De Swarte Gifford. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2003. 150-166.
- Edwards, Wendy J. Deichmann and Carolyn De Swarte Gifford, eds. "Introduction." *Gender and the Social Gospel*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2003.
- Ely, Richard T. *The Labor Movement in America*. NY: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co, 1886.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Social Aspects of Christianity, and Other Essays*. NY: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co, 1889.
- Hamington, Maurice. *The Social Philosophy of Jane Addams*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2009.
- Herron, George. *Between Caesar and Jesus*. NY: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1899.
- Knight, Louise W. *Citizen: Jane Addams and the Struggle for Democracy*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005.
- Lindley, Susan H. "'Neglected Voices' and 'Praxis' in the Social Gospel." *The Journal of Religious Ethics*. 18:1 (Spring 1990): 75-102.
- Phillips, Paul T. *A Kingdom on Earth: Anglo-American Social Christianity, 1880-1940*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1996.
- Rauschenbusch. *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. NY: Macmillan Co, 1907.
- Ruskin, John. *Sesame and Lilies*. NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1865.
- Scudder, Vida. *Social Ideals in English Letters*. NY: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1898.
- Seigfried, Charlene Haddock. "Introduction to the Illinois Edition." Jane Addams. *Democracy and Social Ethics*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2002.
- Stebner, Eleanor J. *The Women of Hull House: A Study in Spirituality, Vocation, and Friendship*. Albany, NY: SUNY P, 1997.
- Wundt, Wilhelm. *Ethics: An Investigation of the Facts and Laws of the Moral Life, Vol II*. Julia Gulliver and Edward Bradford Titchener, Trans. NY: Macmillan Co, 1897.