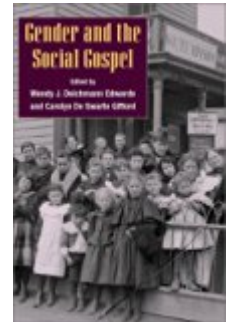


Wendy J. Deichmann Edwards, Carolyn De Swarte Gifford, eds.. *Gender and the Social Gospel*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003. xii + 241 pp. \$21.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-252-07097-6.



Reviewed by Susan Curtis

Published on H-Women (May, 2004)

When I began working in the 1980s on a dissertation that would be published as *A Consuming Faith* in 1991, I was conscious of the ways that the social gospel meant different things to and was experienced differently by men and women. I tried to explore these differences by including analyses of the lives and beliefs of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Ward, Mary Eliza McDowell, Caroline Bartlett Crane, and Mary Perley Macfarland among the biographical sketches of men and women I identified as "important and revealing figures" (p. xx). The title of the work reviewed here, *Gender and the Social Gospel*, addresses a subject that I regard as critically important and one that deserves serious scholarly attention.

The thirteen essays in this volume attend to a variety of gender-related issues. Some, like Carolyn De Swarte Gifford's essay on Frances Willard and Elizabeth Agnew's essay on Mary Richmond, draw attention to women whose work was shaped by social gospel ideals but whose experience is rendered invisible in many standard treatments of the social gospel movement. Other authors, such as Wendy J. Deichmann Edwards and

Janet Forsythe Fishburn, subject the thought and actions of Josiah Strong and Walter Rauschenbusch to critical analysis through a feminist lens. (The surprising [and to be honest, disturbing] result is that Strong, "widely perceived as a narrow-minded racist and nationalist because of the blatant social Darwinism and the unapologetic imperialism" (p. 50) to be found in his book, *Our Country*, emerges as a proto-feminist and strong supporter of women; by contrast, Rauschenbusch, though hailed for his progressive politics and pacifism, appears to have been hopelessly old-fashioned and Victorian in his attitudes toward women.) The final two essays in the volume, by Ingrid Overacker and Michael Dwayne Blackwell, draw out the work of African-American women whose denominations more often than not are not considered part of the social gospel movement. The work of Overacker and Blackwell points to a shared social gospel spirit within a distinctly Black religious tradition.

The strength of this volume lies in the recuperation of individuals and groups whose experience has not always been considered part of the

social gospel tradition. I certainly welcome this work and would encourage more of its kind to be undertaken. But in spite of the strengths of this collection, I find three matters to be troubling. The first I alluded to above. What are the ethical implications of an analysis that valorizes Strong's support of women in the United States apart from his "narrow-minded racism," "blatant Social Darwinism," and "unapologetic imperialism"? Are we left to conclude that his feminist credentials trump his otherwise anti-progressive stance? Similarly, how does Rauschenbusch's tepid support of women's rights and suffrage affect our understanding of his otherwise laudable quest for social justice? I do not wish to question Gifford's and Fishburn's findings; I simply crave a more helpful way of thinking about these apparent contradictions in the thought of Strong and Rauschenbusch that would lead to a more complex understanding of the Social Gospel movement as a whole.

The second concern involves the meaning of "gender" as it is deployed in this volume. "Women and the Social Gospel" might well have been a more appropriate title, for none of the essays analyzes masculinity from either men's or women's perspectives. Is gender being used as shorthand for women in this collection of essays? Perhaps a brief discussion of one of the best essays, a comparison of the theology of Jane Addams, Dorothy Day, and Walter Rauschenbusch by R. A. R. Edwards, will help clarify this concern. Edwards uses Addams, Day, and Rauschenbusch to exhibit the range of theological positions taken by men and women affiliated with the social gospel. This valuable work rescues the Social Gospel from gross over-simplification. But gender as such does not seem to be implicated in any way in the different theological perspectives held by these three people. Indeed, Edwards shows that Day and Rauschenbusch were not that far apart in their *beliefs*, but the decision each one made about how or whether to attract a broad-based following distinguished them from one another. Edwards's insightful analysis depends heavily on her thorough

grounding in theology and in her unearthing of the disconnect between Rauschenbusch's faith and praxis. But in point of fact, gender has very little to do with this analysis. Except for the fact that Day was a woman and Rauschenbusch a man, gender is not the key category of analysis in this project.

My final concern revolves around the introductory essay, which seeks to contextualize the essays that follow it. The aim of the introduction is "to help reverse the longstanding trend of omitting women and gender from mainstream social gospel historiography" (p. 2). The essay effaces important earlier scholarship that attempted to address the concerns of the editors of and contributors to this volume. Without citing the work of Allen F. Davis, the late Robert Crunden, Sandra Sizer, and me, it is fairly easy to argue that scholarship in the field has neglected women and gender. That is not to say that *Spearheads for Reform* and *An American Heroine* (Davis), *Ministers of Reform* (Crunden), *Gospel Hymns and Social Religion* (Sizer), and *A Consuming Faith* (Curtis) provided definitive analyses of women's role and gender issues involved in the social gospel. But if Edwards, Gifford, and the other contributors want to move gender analysis forward, they would do a valuable service by engaging these admittedly older works, identifying their limitations, and explaining more explicitly what the scholars in this volume propose to do, and actually do, differently.

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Citation: Susan Curtis. Review of Edwards, Wendy J. Deichmann; Gifford, Carolyn De Swarte, eds. *Gender and the Social Gospel*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. May, 2004.

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