

**“Deeds, Not Creeds:
The Legacy of the Social Gospel Movement”**

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November 23, 2008

What is the heart of religion?
Is it sitting quietly in prayer and meditation?
Is it reaching out to help people in need,
as near as next door and as far as half a world away?
Is it preaching and teaching
our best understanding of God and the universe?
Is it doing the ancient work of feeding the hungry
and healing the sick?

In a word, *yes*.

The heart of religion is all those things.

The journey of wisdom and transformation within
cannot be separated from the journey of service,
transforming the world.

We need both.

But we have come to believe as a faith community
that the real test of authentic religion
is how you live in the world.

If your actions in this world—

the way you are with your family, your friends, your coworkers,
the way you share your gifts in service to the community—
if all this brings more peace into the world,
more love, more justice,
we say, *that* is the heart of religion.

“Deeds, not creeds,” is an easy and also a profound way
of summing it up.

What you believe and what you give *your* heart to
shows through in what you *do*.

This seems so natural to us today.
But our emphasis on “deeds, not creeds” didn’t just happen.
It’s a direct inheritance from a movement
that swept through American religion 100 years ago
called the Social Gospel movement.

Christianity in America had always taught
that it was important to do good and help other people.
In the 19th century, churches and individual Christians
got more and more involved in social reform.
But it wasn’t until the dawn of the 20th century
that progressive Christians started to preach a new and radical message.
They said, the priorities within their faith have gotten out of whack.
For too long, they said, Christianity has focused on
controversies about the person of Jesus:
Was he a man? Was he a god?
And they said,
those questions which seemed so important to older generations
are not what Christianity is really about.
They said, it matters not who Jesus was.
We are no longer interested in a religion *about* Jesus,
because the heart of Christianity is the religion *of* Jesus—
the lessons he actually taught during his life:
feeding the poor, caring for the vulnerable,
lifting up the oppressed, building “the kingdom of God on earth.”
This is the heart of religion, these new folks said,
and they called it the Social Gospel—
a Gospel calling them to reform their world here and now,
to create a more just society, a more compassionate society
here and now, not in the afterlife, but for living people on this earth.

And it was sorely needed.
Throughout the early 20th century,
income inequality was at truly scary levels.
The top 1% of American wage-earners

made about 18% of total national income.
In 1928, just before the Great Depression, they made 21%.
Compare this with the 1960s and '70s,
when the top 1% of earners made less than 10% of all national income.¹
In the reading we heard earlier from 1917,
when Clarence Skinner spoke of the two extremes of
“the squalor and filth of the slums” and “unearned luxury,”²
he was not exaggerating.

I chose this reading
to give you a small taste of Clarence Skinner’s work.
He was a Universalist minister
and also a professor at the Universalist divinity school
at Tufts University;
he was by no means the only one preaching the Social Gospel
in our Unitarian Universalist tradition,
but he was absolutely one of the most important,
probably the most influential Universalist of the entire 20th century.

In 1915, Skinner was serving a Universalist church
in Lowell, Massachusetts,
otherwise known as Ground Zero for the industrial revolution
in the United States.
Skinner looked around and saw poor people struggling to get by.
He saw children having to grow up far too quickly,
parents weighed down with worry and despair.
He watched as countries around the world
were sucked into a horrific, devastating war that made no sense.
Meanwhile, too many of the churches he knew
were more interested in passing down stale doctrines
and preserving the status quo
than liberating human beings
from the poverty and oppression that was crushing them.

¹ Elizabeth Gudrais, “Unequal America: Causes and Consequences of the Wide—and Growing—Gap between Rich and Poor,” *Harvard Magazine* July–August 2008, p. 23.

² Clarence Skinner, “A Declaration of Social Principles,” adopted by the Universalist General Convention in 1917; available online at <http://universalistchurch.net/universalist-history/a-declaration-of-social-principles-1917/>.

And so, along with many others of his generation,
Clarence Skinner asked: What is at the heart of religion?
What is the point of having a church at all?
He began his 1915 book *The Social Implications of Universalism*
with a warning:

There is no danger that religion should pass out of life.
There *is* danger
that the Church may cease to be the voice of religion.³ (p. 5)

Skinner believed the mission of the church
had to be to transform society—
any other goal was too small.
He was committed to the old Universalist principle
of salvation for all people,
but he expanded it to say
salvation isn't just about what happens after we die,
it's about giving everybody the chance to live a decent life
in *this* world.
Skinner was calling us to *social* salvation.
And he believed Universalism was *the* faith that could make it happen.
He tells us:

The Universalist idea of God
is that of a universal, impartial, immanent spirit
whose nature is love.⁴

Universal: God is the God of everybody and every thing that is.
Impartial: God doesn't play favorites, but loves everyone the same;
Immanent: God is in all things; there is no place where God is not.

Here's what Skinner says about this idea of God:

³ Clarence Skinner, *The Social Implications of Universalism* (Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1915), p. 5.

⁴ Skinner, *Social Implications of Universalism*, p. 21.

It is the largest thought the world has ever known;
it is the most revolutionary doctrine ever proclaimed;
it is the most expansive hope ever dreamed....
This is no tribal deity of ancient divisive civilization,
this is no God of the nation or of a chosen people,
but the democratic creator of the solid, indivisible world
of rich and poor, black and white, good and bad,
strong and weak, Jew and Gentile, bond and free.
Such a faith is as much a victory for the common people
as was the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment
to the Constitution.
It carries with it a guarantee of spiritual liberties
which are precedent to outward forms of governmental action.⁵

“Spiritual liberties...precedent to government action”:
basically he’s saying, there is no way we will ever create a just society
unless we believe that we are all equal in *spirit*,
equally and fully loved by that power which has brought us into being.
He’s saying, we will never have a true *political* democracy,
in which everyone’s voice is truly equal—
we will never have a truly just and compassionate society,
which makes sure everyone has the basic essentials of life—
unless we have a religion that preaches *spiritual* democracy—
the spiritual equality of every person, without reservation,
without regard for race, class, gender,
or any of the divisions that have served to keep us apart and unequal.

Skinner tells us:

No social problem can ever be completely solved
until it is spiritually solved....⁶

By that, he means two things:
First, people who are struggling have to believe in their worth,

⁵ Skinner, *Social Implications of Universalism*, pp. 21–22.

⁶ Skinner, *Social Implications of Universalism*, p. 30.

their *right* to equality and justice, for their struggle to succeed.
And second, those who are living in privilege have to get on board too;
they have to have a spiritual change of heart,
they have to be brought to realize the humanity
of those who are struggling—
they have to realize that they are brothers and sisters,
members of one great family.

In Skinner's own Universalist faith,
that comes directly from the simple belief
that everybody is a child of God.
If we all come from the same source,
then indeed we are all literally sisters and brothers.
It's not just a metaphor; it is literally true.
Skinner put it this way:

[W]e...turn from the old religion which depicted men
divided into the saved and the lost....
We are all of one blood.
Our fortunes and our destinies are so interlocked
that we all move on together whether we will or no....
If God is our Father and we are all children of God,
then we are all brothers.
No denial will alter this indisputable fact.
No inequalities, human or divine, will explain away
or eradicate our common origin and our essential oneness.⁷

And so, in Skinner's faith, the new Social Gospel
was simply a way of living out the responsibility we all have
to *all* our brothers and sisters around the world.
All the different ways we reach out to do justice in the world,
from helping our next-door neighbor
to organizing food drives, to lobbying politicians,
all the vast networks of people trying to help one another—
he said:

⁷ Skinner, *Social Implications of Universalism*, pp. 35–36.

[they] are but varying manifestations
of one vast and solemn faith in the innate spirituality of all men,
and a recognition of their infinite worth
as sons and daughters of the living God.
Whoso interprets this movement
as being not spiritual enough to be religious,
is himself not religious enough
to see the spiritual forces of the common life.⁸

Are we not still believers in this faith—
a faith in the innate spirituality,
the inherent worth and dignity of all people?
Are we not practitioners
of a faith in the reality of our connection to one another
as sisters and brothers,
a faith in the spiritual value—no, the spiritual *necessity*
of working for justice and peace on this earth?

When you drop your change in your Guest At Your Table boxes
this year, and your dollars and your checks,
I urge you to remember that what you are doing
is profoundly religious.
You are living out that Social Gospel
our ancestors believed in with all their hearts.
You are living out the ancient teachings of Jesus
and all the other prophets of every faith who have taught us
to care for the sick, to feed the hungry,
to comfort the prisoners,
to overturn every structure of oppression,
every principality and power
which tries to set limits on who gets to be free,
who gets to live a life of simple, basic decency.

That is always needed in every generation, and especially now.

⁸ Skinner, *Social Implications of Universalism*, p. 37.

In our own United States, since the 1970s,
the inequality between the haves and the have-nots
has been going up and up,
until now it is just as harsh as it was in Clarence Skinner's day.⁹
And we are far more attuned to the inequality between nations.
We see our neighbors across borders
struggling to feed their families,
in many countries working for pennies a day
so that we can buy stuff cheaper—
we see this, and we know it is wrong—
we know it has to change.

Our kind of hope is maybe a more cynical hope
than what was possible for those early Social Gospel folks.
In 1915, Clarence Skinner truly believed his world
was on the verge of a total conversion.
He believed that the ideals of brotherhood and peace
were really going to sweep across the face of the earth
and create a new world where justice was a reality for everyone.

Today we look back on the devastation of the 20th century—
two World Wars, the Holocaust,
so many dictators—Stalin, Pol Pot,
the horrible regimes of Latin America in the '80s—
genocides in Bosnia, in Rwanda,
and continuing today in Darfur,
despite all of our efforts and all of our tears.
The kind of hope you could have in 1915,
that innocence, is no longer available to us today.

But still we are faithful to that vision
of the kingdom of God on earth.
It will never die—
that vision we still share of a world which is truly just,
a world where everyone is free.

⁹ Gudrais, p. 23.

We witness to those unforgettable moments when justice *does* prevail.
And we believe in the power of *our* deeds to take us one step closer,
and another, and another.

What is the heart of our religion?

To love,
to do justice,
to keep doing justice in good times and in bad,
to carry forward the vision,
sustained by hope and faith,
the faith that rises up again and again
whispering to us that life is a blessing
and what we do matters.

I leave you with words of the poet Sheenagh Pugh:

Sometimes things don't go, after all,
from bad to worse. Some years, muscadel
faces down frost; green thrives; the crops don't fail.
Sometimes a man aims high, and all goes well.

A people sometimes will step back from war,
elect an honest man, decide they care
enough, that they can't leave some stranger poor.
Some men become what they were born for.

Sometimes our best intentions do not go
amiss; sometimes we do as we meant to.
The sun will sometimes melt a field of sorrow
that seemed hard frozen; may it happen for you.¹⁰

¹⁰ Sheenagh Pugh, "Sometimes," reprinted in Garrison Keillor, *Good Poems* (New York: Penguin, 2002), p. 215.