



PROJECT MUSE®

---

An Ohio Leader of the Social Gospel Movement: Reassessing  
Washington Gladden

Paul Boyer

Ohio History, Volume 116, 2009, pp. 88-100 (Article)

Published by The Kent State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ohh.0.0058>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/263132>

# An Ohio Leader of the Social Gospel Movement

## *Reassessing Washington Gladden*

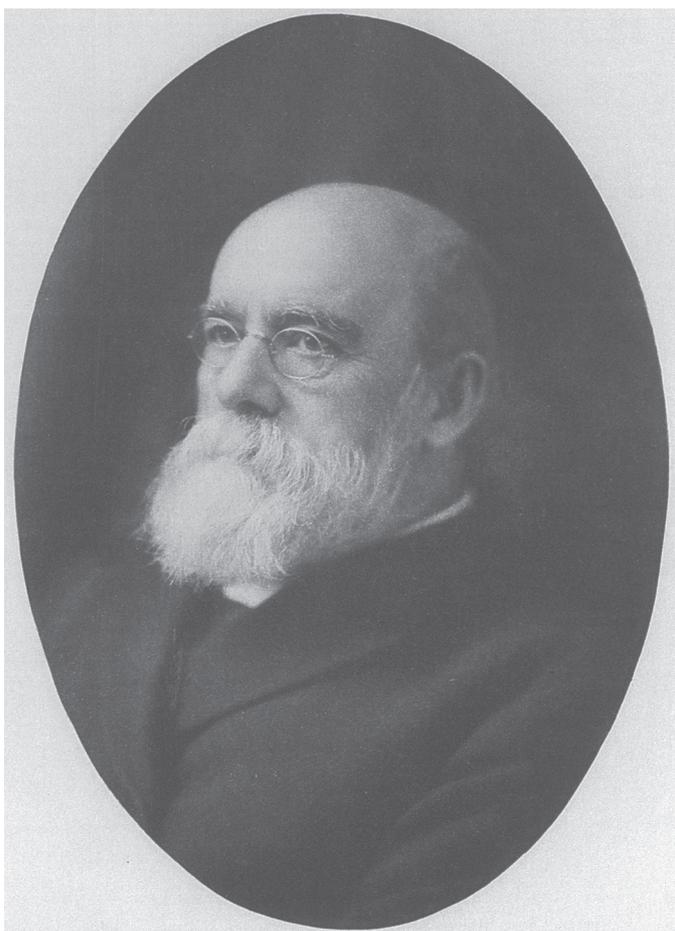
PAUL BOYER

To understand the historical significance of Washington Gladden, the senior pastor of the First Congregational Church of Columbus, Ohio, from 1882 to his death in 1918, we must place his career in a larger historical context. In the late nineteenth century, America was transformed by industrial growth and a tide of immigrants seeking work in the nation's humming factories. As immigrants poured into the cities, slum conditions worsened. Millions of native-born Americans moved to the cities as well, staffing corporate offices, retail shops, and department stores. As a nation of farms and small towns faced the explosive growth of cities and factories, and as Catholic, Jewish, and Orthodox immigrants transformed an overwhelmingly Protestant society, America's churches faced a crisis.

Protestants responded in various ways. Some evangelicals saw city missions as the answer. My paternal grandparents, William and Susanna Boyer, for example, opened a mission in a working-class district of Dayton, Ohio, in 1912 under the auspices of the Brethren in Christ Church, a small Mennonite-related denomination. Others turned to mass evangelism. Dwight L. Moody's urban revivals drew throngs of middle-class churchgoers—but the immigrant masses stayed away in droves.<sup>1</sup>

Another Protestant response came to be called the Social Gospel. In the 1870s, a few liberal ministers began to preach that if Christians took Jesus'

1. Paul Boyer, *Mission on Taylor Street: The Founding and Early Years of the Dayton Brethren in Christ Mission* (Nappanee, Ind.: Evangel Press, for the Brethren in Christ Historical Society, 1987); Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1978), 133-34, 136 (on Dwight L. Moody).



Washington Gladden (1836–1918). Source: Washington Gladden, *Recollections* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909), frontispiece.

teachings seriously, they would address conditions in America's factories and immigrant slums, with their appalling rates of injury, disease, poverty, and infant mortality.

The social gospel impulse took many forms, including campaigns for child-labor laws, factory safety legislation, stricter tenement house codes, and public health regulations. When Jane Addams founded Hull House, a Chicago settlement house in 1889, she described her motives in social gospel terms. In Kansas City, Congregational minister Charles Sheldon advised his congregation to ask themselves "What would Jesus do?" as they confronted the immigrant city. Sheldon's 1896 novel *In His Steps* remains a social gospel classic. The reform-minded British journalist William T. Stead, in his 1894 book *If Christ Came to Chicago*, criticized the city's churches for their self-regarding passivity in the face of rampant vice and corruption.

In 1882, as immigrants poured into New York's Lower East Side and well-to-do parishioners fled, the Reverend William Rainsford (backed by vestryman

J. P. Morgan) transformed St. George's Episcopal Church into a social center offering recreational activities, language classes, and other services to the newcomers. The social gospel's great theologian, Walter Rauschenbusch of Rochester Theological Seminary, argued in such works as *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907) that the Kingdom of God could be achieved in the present age if Christians would unite to combat suffering and social injustice. Other social gospel figures moved further to the Left and embraced socialism.<sup>2</sup>

One of the social gospel's most prominent early leaders was Washington Gladden, born in Pottsgrove, Pennsylvania, in 1836. When his schoolteacher father died in 1841, his mother returned to her family in Oswego, New York, in the heart of the so-called "burnt over district," famous for its religious revivals. Gladden later recalled his vivid memories of the harangues of Jacob Knapp, a popular Baptist revivalist of the day: "I shall never forget some of his descriptions of the burning pit, with the sinners trying to crawl up its sides out of the flames, while the devils, with pitchforks, stood by to fling them back again. It was intended, of course, to frighten sinners. . . . For myself, though a small boy, I distinctly remember that it made me angry."<sup>3</sup>

Here Gladden attended school, worked for a local newspaper, and gained his first taste of politics working for prohibition and antislavery candidates. He shared his family's evangelical faith, once boycotting a funeral sermon preached by a Universalist minister. But he encountered more liberal religious views and gradually came to reject "individualistic pietism" in favor of a religion dedicated to achieving "the Kingdom of God in this world."<sup>4</sup>

In 1856 Gladden enrolled in Williams College in Massachusetts, led by the legendary Mark Hopkins, of whom President James Garfield, a Williams grad, famously said: "A pine bench, with Mark Hopkins at one end of it and me at the other, is a good enough college for me." Graduating in 1859, he entered the Congregational ministry and accepted a call to Brooklyn, New York. Influenced by Henry Ward Beecher, he welcomed Lincoln's election in 1860 as "an ethical advance in the American people" and cheered as the Civil War evolved into an antislavery crusade.<sup>5</sup> In 1860 he married Jennie Cohoon, a former classmate at Oswego Academy. They had four children. Jennie, a retiring person quietly supportive of her husband's very public career, died in 1909.

In 1866, Gladden took a church in North Adams, Massachusetts, where

2. Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1940); Jacob H. Dorn, ed., *Socialism and Christianity in Early 20th Century America* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998).

3. Washington Gladden, *Recollections* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909), 59. The essential beginning point for Gladden's life and thought is Jacob H. Dorn's comprehensive and insightful *Washington Gladden: Prophet of the Social Gospel* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1967).

4. Gladden, *Recollections*, 37, 51, 63 (quotes).

5. *Ibid.*, 95.

the owners of a shoe factory broke a strike by importing Chinese workers. This experience shaped his lifelong stance on “the labor question”: sympathy for workers, hostility to callous managers, cautious support for unions, and a conviction that appeals to Christian morality offered more promise than strikes. In these years he was much influenced by the writings of the liberal Congregationalist minister Horace Bushnell of Hartford, Connecticut. In his influential *Views of Christian Nurture* (1847) and other works, Bushnell rejected Calvinist predestination and the terrors of hell in favor of a “reasonable” religion and a loving God immanent in nature. The friendship and encouragement of the older Bushnell (who preached Gladden’s installation sermon at North Adams in 1867) deepened Gladden’s evolving theological liberalism and his belief in a religion of love.<sup>6</sup>

Returning to New York in 1871 as an editor of the *Independent*, a liberal religious journal, Gladden honed the journalistic skills evident in all his writing. The downfall of New York’s corrupt political boss William Marcy Tweed and his larcenous confederates in a spasm of municipal reform in the early 1870s gave Gladden a lifelong lesson in the power of public opinion, teaching him, he later wrote, “how easy it is for an aroused and resolute community to put an end to municipal misrule.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1875 Gladden returned to New England to pastor a church in Springfield, Massachusetts, a factory town hard hit by the depression of the 1870s. While warning jobless workers against violence, he urged factory owners to take responsibility for their employees’ welfare and find short-term employment for them.<sup>8</sup> In a rudimentary fashion, his proposals anticipated the New Deal’s work relief programs.

In 1876, amid seething labor unrest, the forty-year-old Gladden published *Working People and Their Employers*, an early social gospel manifesto. In this work he attacked the so-called Social Darwinists, who advocated a laissez-faire economy where “the fit” survived and the “unfit” died off, resulting in ultimate progress. Knowing the industrial order firsthand, he had no patience for this panglossian theory. Although drawn to socialism, he rejected it as well, fearing excessive government control. Instead, Gladden sought a middle way rooted in a socially conscious Christianity. If capitalists could be persuaded to live up to their Christian principles, they would show more concern for their workers, and the workers would understand “that the religion of Christ is not hostile to their interests.”<sup>9</sup>

6. *Ibid.*, 171, 119, 164–68; H. Shelton Smith, ed., *Horace Bushnell* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965).

7. Bushnell, *Recollections*, 208.

8. *Ibid.*, 250.

9. Washington Gladden, *Working People and Their Employers* (1876; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1969). Gladden quoted in unpaginated introduction to reprint edition by Leon Stein and Philip Taft.

This book, like most of Gladden's works, came directly from his sermons.<sup>10</sup> This gives them an immediacy that makes them readable still today. Academics might find him simplistic, he said, but they were not his audience: "The greater part of my life has been spent among working people, in working with them, or in working for them. I count among them some of my most valued friends; I know their ways of living and of thinking; and I have tried to make these discussions intelligible and helpful to them."<sup>11</sup>

He also rejected the charge that industrial questions were "too secular for Sunday and the Church."

The Christian . . . who does not see the importance of bringing the truth of the New Testament to bear directly upon the matters now in dispute between labor and capital, is one with whom I do not wish to argue. Now that slavery is out of the way, the questions that concern the welfare of our free laborers are coming forward; and no intelligent man needs to be admonished of their urgency. They are not only questions of economy, they are in a large sense moral questions; nay, they touch the very marrow of that religion of good-will of which Christ was the founder. . . . The pulpit must have something to say about them.<sup>12</sup>

While endorsing the traditional evangelical goal of "saving souls," Gladden gave the phrase his own interpretation. As he would later write: "Souls are men. How to save men, their manhood, their character,—that is our chief problem. Is there any other realm in which character, manhood, is more rapidly and more inevitably made or lost, than this realm of industry? . . . Are we really 'saving souls' when we permit men like the packing-house proprietors and the insurance wreckers to sit comfortably in our pews and enjoy our ministrations?"<sup>13</sup>

In 1882, Gladden moved from New England to the First Congregational Church of Columbus, Ohio. His first impression was not favorable. "The environment was, I confess, depressing," he wrote. "The hills to which I had been wont to lift up my eyes, and from which had often come my help, were nowhere in sight; the flatness and monotony of the landscape were a perpetual weariness. . . . I have learned to take great pleasure in the quieter beauty of these fertile plains and river-bottoms . . . , but nothing of this was

10. Of his thirty-one books, Gladden wrote in his autobiography, "all but six have gone through my pulpit, and are printed as they were preached, with almost no revision" (*Recollections*, 411).

11. Gladden, *Working People and Their Employers*, 4.

12. *Ibid.*, 3.

13. Gladden, *Recollections*, 253.

credible to me in those first months in Columbus.” The city’s physical appearance “was rather crude,” he continued. “Few of its streets were paved, its lighting was primitive, its domestic architecture was not, as a rule, a delight to the eyes.” But he found reason for hope: Columbus “was not only the political capital of the state; it was also, in some sense, the educational and the philanthropic capital; for the state university was here, and state institutions for the blind, the deaf, the insane, and the feeble-minded, as well as the state penitentiary. . . . This made Columbus the natural rallying center for the philanthropic forces of the state.”<sup>14</sup>

With some 50,000 residents, most native-born, Columbus in the 1880s was hardly a teeming immigrant metropolis. And, as historian Donald Meyer has written, Gladden’s parishioners were “of the comfortable middle class; in Columbus, not the strikers, but their bosses, were his flock.”<sup>15</sup> Situated in the city center facing the State House, the church drew politicians, professors, and businessmen. Still, Columbus confronted problems of crime and pauperism that stirred deep anxiety in these years. Though industrialization came comparatively late, Columbus in the years 1860–85, as historian Eric Monkkonen has noted, “changed from a traditional agricultural, commercial, and governmental center to a large, modern, and industrial city.” As the city’s population grew, exceeding 180,000 by 1910, fears of urban disorder and crime intensified. “As the population of the State increases,” the Ohio Board of State Charities noted as early as 1884, “the number of those belonging to the *crime class*, in the nature of things, also increases, and apparently in an enlarged ratio.”<sup>16</sup>

Nor was the region immune to labor unrest. In June 1884, 4,000 coal miners and helpers in Ohio’s Hocking River valley, some fifty miles southeast of Columbus, went on strike after the mine owners, the Columbus and Hocking Coal and Iron Company, hard-pressed by competition from mines in the Pittsburgh area, unilaterally reduced the per-ton pay rate from eighty cents to sixty cents. The miners were already angry with the owners, whom

14. *Ibid.*, 284, 285. In the copy of Gladden’s autobiography at the University of Wisconsin library, at the point where he says he found Columbus “rather crude” in 1882, an undated marginal note says “Still is.”

15. Donald B. Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism, 1919–1941* (1960; repr. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973), 28.

16. Eric H. Monkkonen, *The Dangerous Class: Crime and Poverty in Columbus, Ohio, 1860–1885* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975), quotes, 2, 72. Monkkonen, a statistical historian, finds little correlation between urbanization and increases in crime or pauperism. Contemporary middle-class observers, however, including Gladden, assumed a direct link between urban growth and rising rates of crime and poverty. As Gladden observed in 1892, “Poverty nests in the cities” (quoted in Monkkonen, *The Dangerous Class*, 131). Dorn, *Washington Gladden*, 307–20, cites Gladden’s many sermons and political activism in these years battling gambling, saloons, political corruption, lurid tabloid journalism, violations of the Sunday-closing law, and other perceived evils in Columbus of the 1880s and 1890s.

they called “the Syndicate,” for high prices charged in the company store and other grievances, and the draconian wage cuts proved the last straw. On Monday, June 23, 1884, workers in forty-six mines in the Hocking Valley stayed home, and the mines fell silent.

The strike was long and bitter, particularly when the owners imported more than 1,500 immigrant strikebreakers, protected by Pinkerton guards, and evicted the strikers from their company-owned homes. Strikers assaulted mine guards, torched company houses and an apartment where the strikebreakers were living, set fire to a mine hopper and destroyed other mine property, and sabotaged bridges on the railroad line carrying coal from the mines. Ohio governor George Hoadly sent in the National Guard to restore order. (The strikers refrained from directly attacking the strikebreakers, considering them simply misguided and ill-informed and even potential allies.) The owners refused to compromise, and in March 1885 the last of the strikers conceded defeat and returned to work on the owners’ terms, including taking a humiliating pledge not to join a union and a suffering a further wage cut to forty cents per ton.

Some of the mine’s absentee owners, including the vice president and general manager, belonged to Gladden’s church, forcing him again to confront the “labor question.” His account of the strike and the owners’ grim determination to break the miners’ union at all costs clearly strained his belief that labor disputes could be resolved if both sides observed Christian moral principles. He took comfort, however, in the fact that a year after the strike, when the miners (once again organized despite their no-union pledge) demanded a wage increase. This time the owners agreed to arbitration, and when the arbitrator, a respected state senator, sided with the miners, the owners acquiesced. As always, Gladden found a hopeful lesson in the entire episode: from initial intransigence, the mine owners had learned that “a labor union, when wisely handled and dealt with in a just and friendly spirit, is not necessarily an evil thing.”<sup>17</sup>

In 1886, when Cleveland’s streetcar operators went on strike, Gladden publicly defended their right to form a union. While leery of socialism, he acknowledged that natural monopolies such as the telegraph, transit systems, and municipal utilities should be publicly owned.<sup>18</sup> Never an apologist for capitalism, and always focused on the interests of workers, he did not play a leading role in the national campaigns for corporate regulation,

17. George Cotkin tells the full story in “Strikebreakers, Evictions and Violence: Industrial Conflict in the Hocking Valley, 1884-1885,” *Ohio History* 87 (Spring 1978): 140-50. See also Andrew Birtle, “Governor George Hoadly’s Use of the Ohio National Guard in the Hocking Valley Coal Strike of 1884,” *Ohio History* 91 (1982): 37-57. For Gladden’s version, see his *Recollections*, 291-93 (quote 293).

18. *Recollections*, 306-9.

though he cautiously acknowledged the need for such laws. For him, the key was always an appeal to individual conscience on both sides of the labor divide. In this sense, he remained true to the evangelicalism of his youth, with its emphasis on individual conversion.

In 1895, in the depths of the depression of the 1890s, he wrote hopefully: “The Kingdom of God is here; it has not to be awaited, it has come. Already it is taking possession of every department of human life; all that is needed is that the work should be carried on to completion . . . as every man learns to do habitually the loving thing. Love is the only law; its force is irresistible; it solves all social problems.”<sup>19</sup>

In a lecture series delivered in Chicago in 1895–96, published in 1897 as *Social Facts and Forces*, Gladden reiterated the same theme: “No social order will endure that is not founded on love. . . . This means that every employer must consider his employees . . . as the flock over which he is the shepherd.” The churches’ role was to translate this vision into reality: “The Christian church exists in the world . . . [t]o break down all barriers that keep men apart . . . , to realize a state of society in which there shall be no antipathies of race or rank . . . , neither aristocrat nor plebian. . . . The true integrating force in society is a spiritual force.”<sup>20</sup>

Gladden’s writings on social issues invariably incorporated an appeal to conscience and what he called the “principle of Good Will.” For him, this was the great panacea: “In a society in which the Christian law was recognized as the practical rule,” he wrote in 1909, “there could be no such enormous accumulations [of wealth] in the hands of individuals as . . . have been heaped up in the last twenty-five years. . . . [L]ove is indeed the greatest thing in the world.”<sup>21</sup>

In isolation, such pronouncements seem impossibly visionary and utopian. In Gladden’s defense, however, he typically accompanied his sweeping affirmations with specific policy prescriptions. In the 1895–96 Chicago lectures, for example, he offered a strong (though not unqualified) defense of labor unions; called for legislation to shorten working hours and outlaw child labor; demanded the strict regulation of public utilities; and endorsed corporate profit-sharing arrangements to assure workers of “their fair proportion of the enormous gains of modern civilization.” If corporations failed to serve the public interest, he declared, “their power must be taken from them, at whatever cost,” and they must face “a rigid supervision of all [their] affairs.”<sup>22</sup> As

19. Washington Gladden, introduction to Henry Stauffer, ed., *The Great Awakening in Columbus, Ohio, under the Labors of Rev. B. Fay Mills and His Associates* (Columbus, 1895), 6.

20. Washington Gladden, *Social Facts and Forces* (New York: Putnam’s, 1897), 36, 37, 204–5.

21. Gladden, *Recollections*, 315.

22. Gladden, *Social Facts and Forces*, 26, 39, 40, 65, 113, 114 (quotes 39, 113, 114).

this list makes clear, Gladden identified with the reform movement's urban-industrial branch. As populist protests convulsed Kansas and the Great Plains, he had little to say about the grievances of farmers. Nevertheless, these are hardly the pronouncements of a dreamy idealist out of touch with reality.

Gladden did not shy away from direct political involvement. When he came to Ohio, state elections were held in October. In presidential election years, this meant a double dose of politicking, including candidates' demands for campaign contributions. Deciding that this encouraged corruption, Gladden in 1885 successfully campaigned to shift the state elections to November, coinciding with the national poll.<sup>23</sup> Today he would surely advocate campaign finance reform!

Municipal government had interested Gladden since the days of the Tweed Ring scandals, and in 1900, hearing reports that Columbus's city councilmen were soliciting campaign contributions from municipal corporations whose franchises were up for renewal, Gladden ran for a council seat. He won and served a two-year term. As chair of the committee on gas and electricity and a member of four other committees, he challenged the cozy and secretive arrangements between the city's politicians and the streetcar, interurban, gas, and lighting companies, and he worked tirelessly to protect the interests of the city and its residents in negotiations with the municipal utilities and transit companies, all while fulfilling his pastoral duties. One Columbus newspaper speculated that if he ran for mayor, he would win in a landslide. In Gladden's yeoman service in a thankless civic role, his commitment to the social gospel perhaps found its finest expression.<sup>24</sup>

From the 1870s on, he also plunged into the religious controversies of his day, siding firmly with the so-called "modernists" in rejecting the fundamentalist claim that the Bible was literally dictated by God and is inerrant in every detail. In a series of Congregational "heresy trials," he defended ministers who expressed liberal views. In *Who Wrote the Bible?* (1894), again based on a series of sermons, Gladden insisted that the Bible was not infallible historically, scientifically, or morally. Those who claimed otherwise, he declared, were driving thinking people out of the church. This bestselling work long remained in print. When a troubled college student asked him about the Genesis account of creation, he answered forthrightly: "That story in Genesis is not science; it is a beautiful hymn of the creation, full of the noblest religious truth, but not a scientific account of how the world came to be." How would he react to learn that more than a century later, 55 percent of Americans believe that Genesis is, indeed, a factual account of human origins?<sup>25</sup>

23. Gladden, *Recollections*, 316-18.

24. *Ibid.*, 336-44. Dorn, *Washington Gladden*, 319-32, provides a detailed account of Gladden's city council service.

25. Gladden, *Recollections*, 325; Washington Gladden, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (Boston: Hough-

Gladden was also a hymn writer; his output includes the well-known “Oh Master Let Me Walk with Thee.” And he retained the journalist’s ability to dramatize an issue. In 1905, when John D. Rockefeller gave the Congregational Church’s foreign-mission board \$100,000, Gladden denounced the gift as “tainted money” and called for its return. Reported across the country, the controversy stimulated debate on corporate ethics and the disparities of wealth and poverty in America.<sup>26</sup>

While Gladden in many ways grew more radical as he aged, on one issue he became more circumspect. In an 1895 “Address on Lynching” delivered to Congregational ministers, he had passionately denounced lynching and racial violence and its spread in the Midwest, including Ohio: “It is time that we in our Northern communities should stop this lawlessness. All this [lynching and racial violence] . . . which is going on in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and other parts of the North is of the same piece; and while such things can occur in Northern communities we ought to hide our faces for shame. . . . We ought to create a public sentiment in all our communities with respect to such outrages which shall make them impossible.”<sup>27</sup> His impassioned sermon strengthened a campaign for an Ohio antilynching law led by Harry C. Smith, a black newspaper editor and state legislator from Cleveland, and Albion W. Tourgee, a well-known white opponent of racial violence. In 1896, a year after Gladden’s outspoken attack on lynching, Ohio enacted an antilynching law, described by historian David Gerber as “a model for anti-lynching legislation in other states for years to come.”<sup>28</sup>

The outrages continued, however. More than a thousand lynchings occurred from 1896 to 1909, some in Ohio, including one in Urbana in 1897, and another in Springfield in 1904 in which the victim’s body was left hanging for several days. In Mount Vernon, Ohio, in 1905, a lynch mob of 400 was thwarted only when the sheriff sped away in his automobile carrying the intended victim to safety. Lurid and incendiary newspaper stories gloated over the lynching of black “fiends” and “brutes.”<sup>29</sup>

---

ton Mifflin, 1894); “Poll: Creationism Trumps Evolution,” *CBS News*, Nov. 22, 2004, [www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/11/22/opinion/polls/main657083.shtml](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/11/22/opinion/polls/main657083.shtml) (accessed Sept. 4, 2008).

26. Hopkins, *Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism*, 254; Gladden, *Recollections*, 401-9.

27. Washington Gladden, “Address on Lynching,” *The American Missionary* 49 (Dec. 1895), 406-8 (quotes 406-7). The published transcript of Gladden’s speech ends with the notation “Applause.”

28. David A. Gerber, “Lynching and Law and Order: Origin and Passage of the Ohio Anti-Lynching Law of 1886,” *Ohio History* 83 (Winter 1974): 33-50 (quote 36); David A. Gerber, *Black Ohio and the Color Line* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1976), 250-53.

29. “The Lynching at Urbana,” *New York Times*, June 6, 1897; “Sheriff’s Auto Saves Negro,” *New York Times*, Apr. 25, 1905; “Lynching Mob in Ohio,” *New York Times*, Feb. 28, 1906; Gerber,

Indeed, racial violence, the spread of Jim Crowism, and a general worsening of race relations marked the later 1890s and early twentieth century in Ohio and elsewhere. Antiblack mobs rioted in Akron in 1900. In race riots in Springfield in 1904 and 1906, rampaging white mobs beat blacks randomly and burned black tenements and businesses, while the authorities did little. Across the state, including Columbus, hotels, restaurants, and theaters barred blacks or confined them to segregated facilities.<sup>30</sup>

Yet Gladden, in a brief chapter on “The Negro Problem” in his 1909 autobiography, ignored lynching, racial violence, and the spread of Jim Crowism in the North, including in his own state and city. He boasted of Congregationalists’ aid to ex-slaves in years past and lauded educational efforts for southern blacks, but he passed silently over issues of racism closer to home.<sup>31</sup> The NAACP, launched in 1909 by W. E. B. DuBois and others, explicitly targeted lynching. Yet Gladden, despite his passionate pronouncement in 1895, remained silent on this issue. With racism intensifying and Jim Crowism deepening its grip, the topic had evidently become too sensitive even for a nationally known social gospel leader like Gladden while he remained pastor at one of Columbus’s leading churches.

By contrast, Gladden’s response to the foreign wars of his era remains uncannily relevant. In 1898, with the United States poised for war against Spain, Cuba’s colonial ruler, Gladden published “Our Nation and Her Neighbors.” This pamphlet praised the goal of ending Spain’s brutal rule in Cuba but otherwise sharply criticized the rush to war. The popular mood was not high-minded idealism, he wrote, but simply lust to defeat a weak enemy. “On the streets and in the newspapers,” he wrote, “the frantic zest for war . . . does not make one very proud of the American people.”<sup>32</sup>

To the contemporary reader, this pamphlet inevitably stirs thoughts of Iraq. In 2002–03, the U.S. administration’s apocalyptic warnings of Iraq’s “weapons of mass destruction” helped build support for a preemptive U.S.-led invasion of that country. In February 1898, when an explosion on the USS *Maine*, an American battleship anchored in Havana harbor, killed 260 Americans, jingoistic newspapers immediately blamed Spain. Gladden’s “Our Country and Her Neighbors” questioned the rush to blame Spain, and later research con-

---

*Black Ohio and the Color Line*, 253; Ray Stannard Baker, “What is Lynching? A Study of Mob Justice South and North,” *McClure’s Magazine*, Feb. 1905. See also Ray Stannard Baker’s *Following the Color Line* (1908; repr., New York: Harper and Row, 1964), with an introduction by Dewey W. Grantham.

30. Gerber, *Black Ohio and the Color Line*, 247–49, 257–63.

31. Gladden, *Recollections*, 366–76. For an illuminating discussion of the racial views of Gladden and other social gospel leaders, see Dorn, *Washington Gladden*, 291–302.

32. Washington Gladden, *Our Nation and Her Neighbors* (Columbus: Quinius & Rideour, 1898), 13.

firmed his doubts. But the jingoistic press screamed, “Remember the *Maine*,” and America went to war—as it would again 105 years later.

Gladden also reflected apprehensively on the postwar period. Defeating Spain would be the easy part, he predicted, but what then? “When the Spaniards are driven out of Cuba will there be any elements left out of which [a] stable, free, and independent government can be constructed?”<sup>33</sup> In fact, a home-grown dictatorship soon arose in Cuba. In the Philippines, after defeating Spain, U.S. troops battled an independence movement in a protracted and brutal guerrilla war involving heavy civilian casualties and the torture of captured guerrilla fighters.<sup>34</sup> Reading Gladden’s 1898 pamphlet from a contemporary perspective, one might almost wonder, what have we learned?

Gladden also addressed the war that erupted in Europe in 1914. President Woodrow Wilson initially advocated U.S. neutrality, but by 1916, locked in a campaign for reelection, he called for a military buildup in the name of “preparedness.” In that year, the eighty-year-old Gladden published “A Plea for Pacifism,” a sermon deploring the drift to war. The military contractors financing the preparedness campaign, he charged, stood to profit handsomely: “It matters not whose soil is reddened or whose ships are sunk, war brings grist to their mill.” Corporate and banking interests that stood to profit, he went on, were devoting “vast resources of propagandism” to “fill[ing] the public mind with the fears and suspicions which will prevent the return of peace.” With heavy sarcasm, Gladden dismissed the claim that the military buildup was for defense. With the danger of attack on America close to zero, he said, “defense” was the great cry: “Armaments mean war, and sooner or later they bring war. Of course they are for self defense; they always are. . . . They are never used in these days for any other purposes. All the belligerents on the continent of Europe are fighting on the defensive today. Ask them! Armaments for aggression, for conquest? Perish the thought.”<sup>35</sup>

Gladden’s plea for peace ended on a somber note: “It is within the power of this nation at this juncture to inflict upon the human race an unspeakable injury, and it looks as if she were bound to do it. God grant that I may not live to see it.”<sup>36</sup> He did live to see what he feared, but just barely. America entered the war in April 1917, and Gladden died in July 1918. He is buried in Columbus’s Green Lawn Cemetery.

History has not been kind to the social gospel advocates. In *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, deep in his Marxist

33. *Ibid.*, 13.

34. Stuart Creighton Miller, “Benevolent Assimilation”: *The American Conquest of the Philippines, 1899–1903* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1982).

35. Washington Gladden, “A Plea for Pacifism” (Columbus: Champlin Press, [1916]), 2, 3, 4.

36. *Ibid.*, 16.

phase and writing in the depths of the Great Depression, attacked the social gospel leaders and Progressive-era liberals like John Dewey for their naive optimism about human nature and social reform, their faith in reason as a means of resolving power struggles between social classes and nation-states, and their misguided attempt to apply standards of personal morality to the behavior of large social aggregates.<sup>37</sup>

In this polemic, Niebuhr was in part exorcising his own past as a social gospel pastor in Detroit from 1915 (thus briefly overlapping with Gladden's long pastorate in Columbus) through 1928. Yet his criticism, based on a position he called "Christian realism," had a point. Gladden and his social gospel colleagues, living in what now seems almost a charmed era before the full horrors of the twentieth century unfolded, were indeed touchingly hopeful that appeals to conscience and the teachings of Jesus could transform society and prevent wars and conflicts. As we have seen, some of Gladden's rhetorical flights, if read in isolation, apart from his specific policy recommendations, can indeed seem hopelessly idealistic.

But when one assesses Gladden and his social gospel colleagues from the perspective of their own day, rather than from our bleaker and more chastened vantage point, and explores the full range of their writings and social engagement, they do not appear quite as irrelevant and naive as Niebuhr portrayed them. As historian Jacob Dorn observes at the end of his admiring biography of Washington Gladden, the "Gladden Window" at Columbus's First Congregational Church, with its two central figures representing "Charity" and "Justice," aptly sums up his enduring strengths.<sup>38</sup> Gladden's life and work, as he followed world and national events from his study in Columbus, merit at least a close second look as we continue to grapple with many of the same issues and challenges he and his generation confronted.

37. Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 136-41.

38. Dorn, *Washington Gladden*, 446.