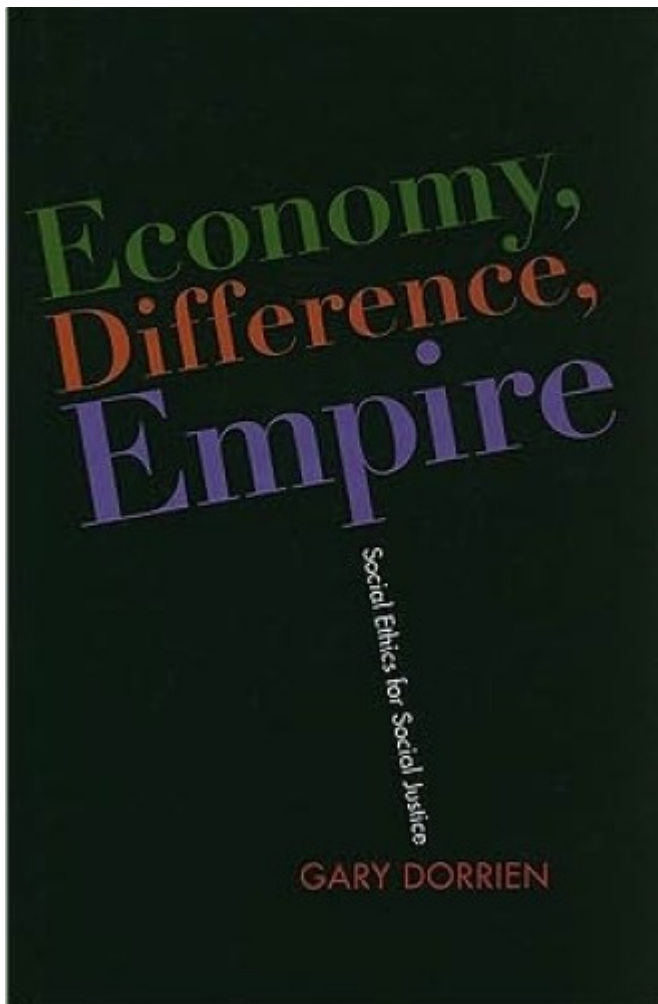


# Past progressives

by [Timothy Mark Renick](#) in the [May 31, 2011](#) issue

## In Review



## Economy, Difference, Empire

by Gary Dorrien  
Columbia University Press

These are troubling times for the defenders of liberal Christian ethics. Amid a world that seems to be dominated by Tea Partiers and Fox News commentators—and by

attacks on labor unions, immigrants and the poor—it is easy to forget that there was a time when liberal Christianity mattered in America. There was a time when Christian liberal theologians had the power to change the course of public opinion; when politicians turned to them for guidance about economics, foreign policy and war; and when the outcomes of elections rested on a candidate's ability to champion principles of Christian social justice. It is easy to forget that there was a time when being progressive was a criterion for public office rather than a damning political epithet.

In *Economy, Difference, Empire*, Gary Dorrien reminds us of that time with power and poignancy. Through a collection of 19 essays, the gifted social ethicist not only explores the origins and heights of the social justice movement in American liberal Christianity but studies its challengers and traces its decline. Dorrien, professor of social ethics at Union Theological Seminary and professor of religion at Columbia University, wrote the essays for presentation in various contexts over the course of two decades. Some were historical lectures; others were opinion pieces; still others were academic biographies. Together they cohere into not only a powerful account of what once was but an intriguing reminder of what still might be.

According to Dorrien, Christianity has always had a social mission rooted in the New Testament message of justice for the poor and the vulnerable, "but the idea that Christianity has a social mission to transform the structures of society in the direction of social justice is distinctly modern." Having forerunners in the Christian abolitionist movement, this idea did not fully take hold in the United States until the late 19th century with the emergence of influential Protestant ministers such as Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch.

Holding pastorates in churches in Brooklyn and in Columbus, Ohio, and inspired by the rapid growth of labor unions in the late 1880s, Gladden saw a connection between Christian teachings and economic structures. Of the American worker Gladden wrote, "Experience has shown . . . that the wage-receiving class is getting no fair share of the enormous increase of wealth." His response was to tout not socialism—which he saw as too bureaucratic to work and which he criticized for stifling individual creativity and industriousness—but Christianity, or more specifically the Christian employer. According to Gladden, Christian employers, many of whom filled the pews of his churches, should admit the workers into an industrial partnership "by giving them a fixed share in the profits of production, to be divided among them, in proportion to their earnings, at the end of the year."

Using Bible passages such as "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect" and "Thy kingdom come," Gladden preached a brand of Christianity that did not permit Christians to passively accept the inequities of the world around them while awaiting a divine resolution; his postmillennialism demanded that Christians seek to overcome social injustice today. "The end of Christianity is twofold, a perfect man in a perfect society. These purposes are never separated," he declared. In Gladden the Social Gospel movement was born.

Gladden's cause was soon joined by a Baptist minister from the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood in New York, Walter Rauschenbusch. For Rauschenbusch, Dorrien writes, "the crisis of capitalist civilization was an opportunity to recover the lost kingdom of Jesus." In a manner at odds with current understandings of liberal Christianity, Rauschenbusch defined himself as an evangelist and proposed to Christianize America. His sense of what it meant to Christianize, though, was founded firmly in the Social Gospel: Christians must "humanize in the highest sense" by abolishing "parasitic wealth and predatory commerce." These were the right ideas for the right time, and Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis* went through 13 printings and sold 50,000 copies in the five years after its publication.

The influence of Gladden, Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel on the United States was mixed, but it was very real. The Social Gospel was instrumental in the movements to build universities for African Americans and to establish suffrage for women. As Gladden recognized that the way to overcome economic inequities was to preach Christian social justice to the employers who could change the prevailing wage system, the social justice movement consistently recognized that the path to overturning unjust social structures could be found in the transformative power of Christianity on those who hold power.

But Dorrien points out that neither Gladden nor Rauschenbusch extended these radical ideas to the point of advocating true racial or gender equality, and Dorrien suggests that the Social Gospel's mission to transform the world with (and into) Christianity was a significant contributor to 20th-century American notions of manifest destiny. In fact, when President Wilson justified U.S. entry into World War I with words about saving the world for democracy, Gladden himself drew a connection to the Social Gospel's commitment to transformation of the world.

Part of the fun—and challenge—of reading *Economy, Difference, Empire* is the subversive impact its essays have on current notions of what is liberal and what is

not. The liberal Gladden became a supporter of American participation in World War I. The liberal Rauschenbusch advocated the transformation of the United States into a Christian nation. We also learn that for decades American liberal Christians opposed ecumenism and religious pluralism as a great threat to both Christianity and the nation.

Chief among the opponents of religious pluralism, writes Dorrien, were the editors of the *Christian Century*. Refounded in 1908 by Charles Clayton Morrison and bearing a name, according to Dorrien, "that reflected the ambitions of the social gospel," the *Christian Century* in the early 1950s became one of the first magazines to use the term *pluralism* to refer to the preservation and peaceful interactions of a range of religions in a single community. The surprising twist? The *Century*'s editors at the time referred to pluralism of this sort as a "national menace." The United States worked, they thought, because it was a Protestant project guided by the ideals of the Enlightenment. To surrender this notion would lead to disaster, predicted the magazine.

Dorrien himself confounds expectations of what it means to be liberal. Although he is a harsh critic of aspects of U.S. foreign policy—characterizing the United States as having an "imperialist trajectory" from its founding, for instance—he is neither a pacifist nor an isolationist. Rather, he says that he represents the "anti-imperialist wing of the liberal interventionist school." Echoing the beliefs of Reinhold Niebuhr, the namesake of the academic chair he now holds at Union Theological Seminary, Dorrien labels himself a realist who accepts the reality of human evil, the will to power and the limits of our human ability to counter these wrongs through peaceful means. Liberalism, according to Dorrien, does not equate to softness or idealism.

Given Dorrien's confounding of our expectations about what it means to be liberal, it is perhaps fitting that he turns in the volume's closing essays to Barack Obama. In Obama, Dorrien finds a kindred spirit—someone who defies political labels for all of the right reasons. Dorrien tells us that the political right and the political left make the same mistake about Obama. The right continues to doubt the sincerity of the president's support for U.S. military interventions despite considerable evidence to the contrary; the left sees Obama—who came into office in part because of his opposition to the war in Iraq—as pandering to conservatives in his support of military operations in Afghanistan and Libya. Both views are mistaken because they are based on the same caricature of what it means to be liberal. For a liberal interventionist with realist tendencies such as Dorrien, there is no contradiction in

Obama's support for one war but opposition to another. To Dorrien, liberalism is not ideological but pragmatic.

Neither is there a contradiction in another characteristic that confounds the president's critics: Obama's claim to be Christian despite his willingness to ask hard questions about his personal faith and to diverge from the prevailing positions of the mainstream Christians of his day. Through the lens of the Social Gospel, such questioning and divergence is not oppositional to but definitional of Christianity.

*Economy, Difference, Empire* invites us to question our own understandings of what it means to be a liberal Christian. When we do, we reach a surprising conclusion: liberal Christianity may still matter in America after all.