When I entered the doctoral program in Temple University’s Department of Religion in 2006, John Raines taught the first course I took—a seminar on the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr. Fittingly, Raines was also a member of the committee before whom I defended my dissertation in September 2013. “The Social is Personal: Harry Emerson Fosdick, The Riverside Church, and the Social Gospel in the Great Depression,” using Fosdick and Riverside as a lens, attempts to gauge the fate of the social gospel in the U.S. as the decade after the First World War gave way to a global economic depression. The study focuses on the confluence of three streams: liberal Protestant theology, social gospel reformism, and personalist philosophy.

This convergence, which I refer to as social gospel personalism, demonstrated simultaneous concerns for social change and for the development of interior spiritual resources; the conviction that social transformation would best be effected by spiritually vigorous and psychologically healthy individuals showed a rhetorical tendency for the social to dissolve into the individual. The following represents an abridgement of a section written in response to a suggestion by Raines that I add “some additional material on a more physical gleaning of Fosdick as a personal phenomenon” as a means of sharpening my critique.¹

An Obstructed View: Social Gospel Personalism and Class

One way of construing the social gospel personalism that Fosdick articulated is to note, in ways that he did not, the specificity of his message in terms of its applicability to and deployment by his audiences. The particularities of Fosdick’s own social setting, the material circumstances of his life and the social networks in which he was embedded, produced a message that was limited by class in ways beyond Fosdick’s recognition. While Fosdick envisioned the arising of a moral aristocracy, cutting across categories of race and class issuing forth in an individually-rooted transformation of society, his conceptualization of social gospel personalism bore the distinct imprint of class privilege. This is seen quite clearly by examining the material conditions within which Fosdick formulated and gave voice to his expressions of social gospel personalism, and juxtaposing them against a pair of interactions between Fosdick and a radical, Southern, Christian labor activist—interactions that are analytically useful, in part, because Fosdick himself was unaware of them.

With the exception of his first pastorate, Fosdick was a lifelong New Yorker. He was born in Buffalo and spent his childhood in the western part of the state. His father was a teacher, so education was a core familial value. He completed his undergraduate studies at Colgate University before attending Union Theological Seminary and completing additional coursework at Columbia. When, in 1918, he was called to the pulpit of the First Presbyterian Church, New York City became the seat of his pastoral vocation and would remain so for the remainder of his career. It was in New York City—among the elite

¹ John Raines, e-mail message to author, July 1, 2013.
institutions on Morningside Heights—that he would see the erection of The Riverside Church, that he would develop relationships with editors and publishers who would disseminate his thought globally, and that he would become a figure within the developing field of radio broadcasting. While he preferred the quietude of rural settings—and spent significant time in them—it was the urban context that made Harry Emerson Fosdick the man into Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick, internationally known preacher and author.

Fosdick’s fame and productivity led to very comfortable material circumstances. His ministerial salary was relatively modest; the annual salary with which he ended his first pastorate was $5,000; that was the same salary he drew in each of his years at First Presbyterian Church. When he accepted the call to Park Avenue Baptist Church in 1925, he insisted to Trustee and investment banker James C. Colgate that he would accept no more. “You would know, of course, without my saying so, that my interest in this adventurous enterprise of which we are thinking is not at all financial,” he wrote to Colgate; “but I shall be glad to have that fact made unmistakable by the definite understanding that my salary shall not in any case exceed five thousand dollars a year.” It was raised to $7,000 in 1928, and to $10,000 in 1930, but these increases compensated for a reduction in salary from a decreased teaching load at Union. In 1934, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. established a fund which, in part, helped to further increase Fosdick’s salary when he further limited his teaching at Union; in a letter thanking Rockefeller, Fosdick stated, “In no other way than this could I have accepted this substitution of church income for seminary income, for Mrs. Fosdick and I were not only willing but determined never to allow increase in my salary to be a change in the church’s program.”

Fosdick thus drew a salary from Riverside that was comfortable but not, by the standards of the day, exorbitant. However, his financial and material comforts went well beyond his church paychecks; indeed, his annual income generally exceeded $25,000. In exchange for his teaching duties, Union paid him $3,600 annually in addition to furnishing him with what Miller describes as a “spacious, handsome apartment.” When Fosdick gave up his seminary salary altogether in 1934, the seminary insisted that he keep the apartment. His honoraria for the speaking engagements he kept all over the country could be as high as $1,000, and he could earn as much as $1,200 for a published article. Over the course of his authorial life, he earned tens of thousands of dollars in book royalties. Fosdick’s finances were secure enough that he was able to hire household help to assist with childcare, cooking, and cleaning; his sense, then, of the deprivations visited upon families by the Great Depression did not come from firsthand experience.

Fosdick and his family had the means to travel extensively, and did so. He undertook a preaching tour of the British Isles in 1924, and toured the Holy Land before assuming the pastorate of Park Avenue Baptist Church. The family visited numerous places in the United

---


3 Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archive at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2A Box 4 Folder 7.

4 Rockefeller Archive Center, Rockefeller Family Collection, Record Group 3, Series N, Box 72, Folder 558.
States, and also enjoyed travel to Europe. But Fosdick's favorite destination was Maine. In 1919, he and his extended family had purchased Mouse Island in Boothbay Harbor and completed cabins there in 1924. Fosdick and family spent most summers there; he stayed in New York until early August, preaching at Riverside while Columbia held its summer sessions. Afterward, the family would spend several weeks on the island. Fosdick's description of the dwellings is suggestive of the creature comforts to which he was accustomed as a result of his success: what Miller denotes as “a spacious stone structure with three porches, living room, dining room, kitchen, toilet, two maid’s rooms, upstairs sleeping porch, daughters’ room, study, guest room, two baths,” Fosdick referred to as “simple cottages.”

If class in part reflects the relative availability of various types of social and cultural resources as Sean McCloud has noted, then Fosdick's summer residence also functioned as a shaper of his classed perspective insofar as it provided him further means of access to people who wielded power both within the congregation and in the wider culture. For instance, a 1925 letter which Fosdick sent to Colgate at the latter’s summer home in Vermont indicates that he had met with Edward L. Ballard, president of the Board of Trustees, “here on the island,” as well as having “visited Mr. Rockefeller at Seal Harbor” his summer residence in Maine, to discuss matters of planning the new church building.

Fosdick's relationship with Rockefeller evinced genuine affection on both parts, with Fosdick regularly addressing correspondence to “My dear Mr. Rockefeller,” and Rockefeller closing a 1934 letter by referring to Fosdick as his “dear friend,” professing his “deep love” for him, and offering gratitude to God “for the way in which He is using you.” It was also a relationship with material implications, the most obvious being the tremendous amount of resources that Rockefeller poured into the construction of The Riverside Church structure and its various programs. But Rockefeller also demonstrated a predilection for showering his minister friend with personal gifts. Some Fosdick politely declined, but Miller lists others that he accepted, including a dictaphone, a fur coat, an all-expense paid vacation to Williamsburg, premium medical care, and a “free will” fund of $25,000.

Both men were at constant pains to avoid any suggestion that Rockefeller was dictating the content of Fosdick's preaching and public pronouncements, and Miller is convincing in his interpretation that the effort was sincere on both parts. At the same time, a 1927 exchange of letters between the two indicates that Fosdick's consciousness was shaped within the networks of relationships through which he defined himself. Rockefeller took issue with a sermon Fosdick had preached that was critical of industry, quoting another parishioner, “I don't think Dr. Fosdick was fair to industry in what he said,” writing that he felt that relations between labor and capital had improved over the prior years and that blanket condemnations of industry did a disservice to those capitalists who were creating better

---

5 Miller, Harry Emerson Fosdick, 315-316.
7 Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archive at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2B Box 4 Folder 7.
8 Ibid.
conditions for their employees. Fosdick was firm, for his part, in defending his statements, asserting that he had to critique industrial abuses as a means of warding off criticism that his position “in a powerful church with powerful men” constrained him from dealing “so frankly with the industrial problems as I do with international, ecclesiastical, and theological problems.”

He positioned these issues to Rockefeller as “the very problem on which you so long and so faithfully have labored,” and closed the letter by reinforcing that he and Rockefeller shared common concerns. “Your sympathy, goodwill, and cooperation,” he wrote, “are a great encouragement and I thank you for them most, not when you are complimentary but when you are frank.” Rockefeller, not quite satisfied with the conversation’s conclusion, sent three pamphlets on industrial relations. Fosdick’s response averred, “I sincerely trust that the idea did not at all get into your mind that I thought you not a liberal in your industrial attitude. Of course, I took it for granted that you were a liberal.” Further, Fosdick contended that, had he not been convinced of Rockefeller’s progressive convictions, he “never would have dreamed of taking the pastorate of a church in which you were so prominent and powerful a member. Be sure, therefore, that if ever in the pulpit I shoot off a gun on the industrial question, I am thinking of you as behind the gun and not in front of it.”

Fosdick’s social gospel personalism, then, even when critical of capital, sought to remain in its good graces.

Standing in contrast to Fosdick and illustrating the limits of social gospel personalism as conceived and enacted within the web of relationships and material conditions on Morningside Heights is the activism of Claude C. Williams. Williams followed a common liberal Protestant trajectory of moving beyond the bounds of the conservative tradition in which he had been reared, but his differences from Fosdick exceed his similarities. Williams spent his childhood in western Tennessee, part of a farming family that belonged to the Cumberland Presbyterian church. His inquisitiveness as a child led his parents and neighbors to conclude that he was destined to become a preacher. After a peripatetic youth working odd jobs and enjoying a stint in the Army, at twenty-six Williams entered Bethel College in McKenzie, Tennessee, a school which served as a Cumberland Presbyterian seminary. The denomination had a strict code of conduct that forbade alcohol, tobacco, gambling, and dancing, and a belief in the literal truth of the Bible as God’s word. At the same time, they embraced some controversial positions: by 1920, Bethel enrolled female students, some of whom would go on to preach. It was at Bethel that Williams heard his professors rail against the influence of wealth in American society and in churches.

Williams accepted a preaching assignment within the old Presbyterian Church in the USA (not to be confused with the contemporary Presbyterian Church (USA) established in 1983) in late 1923. A yearning for a universal Christian truth that transcended denominational boundaries initially attracted him to the fundamentalist movement. He enrolled in two

---

9 Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archive at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2A Box 8 Folder 20.
correspondence courses offered by the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. He also sought to further educate himself in theology, philosophy, and history, and to that end joined the Religious Book Club, a far more liberal undertaking that published and disseminated scholarly works geared toward non-academics.\textsuperscript{11} The first book Williams received from the Book Club was Fosdick’s \textit{The Modern Use of the Bible}, which sought to make Christian faith relevant to contemporary society by making higher criticism of the Bible accessible to lay readers, treating scripture as the record of Christian ideals and their development and therefore a practical guide to moral behavior and action for modern people.\textsuperscript{12} The book stirred a new vision in Williams.

With an awakened desire for a broader circle of religious scholars with whom he could discuss theology, Williams enrolled at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, where he encountered the social gospel through the teachings of Professor Alva W. Taylor. Fosdick’s book thus played a role in Williams’ awakening to a socially engaged Christianity as it enabled him to conceive of the Bible and Christian action in the world in new ways. Indeed, when in 1932 Williams organized the construction of the Proletarian Labor Church and Temple, he erected a sign at the building site framing his overall goal for the project in the language of John 10:10, “That They Might Have Life, and Have It More Abundantly”—scriptural inspiration which flowed directly from his reading of Fosdick.\textsuperscript{13}

Three years later, Williams found himself in New York City. He was in the city for a conference “against the rise of Fascism and terror in the South.” On his first morning in the city, Williams took the opportunity to worship at Riverside Church so that he could see and hear the preacher who had helped catalyze his new approach to Christianity. He was “dumbfounded” by the size of the building and disappointed by the sermon, which he characterized as a “good opiate.” Williams felt that the sermon, which he recorded as “Can We Be Christians in Our Society?” argued that poor people should be content as they are because they, rather than the rich, are promised the kingdom of God; thus even “a southern tenant farmer girl in Arkansas may have spiritual victory.” As labor historians Gellman and Roll summarize, “The massive building, the finely dressed parishioners, the timid sermon all underlined for Williams the inability of well-meaning liberals to understand, let alone change, conditions” in the South.\textsuperscript{14}

Fosdick evidenced awareness of his own class position, and that of Riverside Church on the whole; in his autobiography, he laments Riverside’s lack of success in “including all economic and occupational classes in our congregation.”\textsuperscript{15} However, juxtaposing Fosdick and Williams—two proponents of socially engaged Christianity—helps to demonstrate just how circumscribed Fosdick’s articulation of social gospel personalism was by geography, materiality, and social networks. The very factors which allowed Fosdick’s voice and

\begin{footnotes}
\item[14] Ibid., 60.
\end{footnotes}
thought to be disseminated to a broad audience, creating an image of universal applicability—his positioning in New York City, his relationships with socially prominent individuals, his ties to publishing and radio figures—also shaped a standpoint which left him ignorant of the perspectives of and particular issues facing activists such as Claude Williams, and therefore ultimately less useful to them. Williams’ two encounters with Fosdick’s thought, and his responses to them, thus help to illustrate that the narrative of social gospel personalism is a narrative of middle and upper class Protestantism.

G. Kipp Gilmore-Clough, Ph.D.
Adjunct Instructor of Religion
Lebanon Valley College
Annville, PA