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by
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ABSTRACT

This project follows recent scholarship that challenges an older paradigm of the social gospel tradition’s demise after World War I. It undertakes a multifaceted analysis of Harry Emerson Fosdick, his local and national audiences, and his context of The Riverside Church—as building and as congregation—as a means of tracing the contours of the social gospel through the Great Depression. Fosdick was an internationally known liberal Protestant minister who was prominent in efforts to rearticulate the social gospel and maintain its relevance in the postwar period. He grounded his interpretation of the social gospel in personalist philosophy, which asserted individual personality as irreducible, yet also shaped within social networks. Personalism manifested liberal Protestantism’s emphasis on experience, pairing well with the interest in psychology that burgeoned in the early twentieth century, and which was prominent in Fosdick’s preaching and writing. I refer to this threefold convergence of liberal theology, social gospel critique and activism, and personalist philosophy as social gospel personalism. While social gospel personalism promoted activity to bring about social change, I find within it a rhetorical tendency to prioritize attention to the psychological development of personality as the primary means through which the aim of transforming society would be met. In this dissertation, I attend to the ways in which social gospel personalism as articulated by Fosdick and embodied in The Riverside Church was particularly classed, with attendant blind spots and limitations, while simultaneously serving to provide its white, middle class adherents with a religious grounding that helped them weather a period of acute social and economic upheaval.
Recent scholarship on American religious liberalism seeks to move beyond the narratives of Protestantism, but I argue that Fosdick and Riverside, by virtue of their cultural prominence, represent an important attempt to find personal grounding amidst depersonalizing social currents, and a religious vocabulary for critiquing those social forces that diminished the person. To make this argument, I engage social gospel personalism from multiple angles. I begin with an analysis of Fosdick’s preaching and writing, situating him within the social gospel tradition and tracing the presence of personalist thought throughout his message. I then consider Fosdick as a mediated phenomenon, allowing an examination of the ways in which his message was received and utilized by his multiple audiences, suggesting that the dynamics of mediation tended to heighten the individual, existential elements of Fosdick’s message. In turning to the Riverside Church itself, I interpret the building as a site within which social gospel personalism was embodied and enabled, attending to the utilization of space as both reflective of and formative of religious practice. Finally, I analyze two of Riverside’s programmatic responses to the vast unemployment engendered by the Great Depression as a means of illuminating the ways in which social gospel personalism was and was not prepared to meet the crisis.
For Cathy, for everything
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I read things that many people skip over. As a member of that seemingly declining breed of individuals who purchase entire albums in compact disc form, I read the liner notes of every single album that makes its way into my home. Likewise, if I have obtained a book in exchange for money, the chances are greater than even that I will also invest some time in scanning the acknowledgments. This is true even though the overwhelming majority of these are comprised of lists of the names of people I have never met, nor ever shall. It is a humbling reminder that no finished product is a solitary creation. Indeed, if the numerous compilers of acknowledgments are trustworthy guides, it is a truism that no project is completed by a single person, springing full-formed like Athena from the head of Zeus; many voices, explicit and implicit, are required in the processes of gestation, fruition, completion. A related truism absolves those co-creators of blame, confessing all shortcomings of a project as the author’s own. Writing this dissertation has made these sentiments real to me in a way that reading acknowledgments pages can only hint at. At the risk of becoming a purveyor of cliches, I must appeal to both. More people than I can count made this dissertation possible; some of them deserve especial attention for their contributions. At the same time, those who carry this project’s virtues hold none of the responsibility for its failings, which belong to me alone.

My experience in Temple University’s Department of Religion has been a rich one. This has been my third iteration as a Temple student, and each turn around the wheel has proved to be even better than the one before. In particular, I owe my unending thanks to my advisor, Rebecca Alpert. It is not an overstatement to say that, without her, this
project would never have been finished. Her honest and wise feedback and her genuine encouragement every step of the way were utterly invaluable. The rest of my committee has likewise been uniformly helpful. John Raines taught the first seminar I took in the Religion Department—on Reinhold Niebuhr—along with several other courses, and has never been less that utterly generous with his insights. Terry Rey and David Watt have each demonstrated to me what it means to fill the dual roles of scholar and teacher. And my external reader, Beth Bailey, graciously offered her time and energy.

There are, of course, others who have likewise enriched this latest Temple experience. Linda Jenkins, department coordinator par excellence, always made sure that I was administratively settled, preventing headaches with her knowledge of systems and her attention to detail. More than once, Fred Rowland at Paley Library connected me with resources that I needed but couldn’t figure out how to access on my own. And a community of scholars and friends helped both to broaden my knowledge and to remind me that there is more to life than academics. David Krueger warrants special attention, not only for conversations on shared scholarly interests, but for the years of friendship that preceded my entrance into this program. Others who have offered wisdom, knowledge, perspective, companionship, and/or witty Facebook status updates include Tricia Way, Sean Sanford, Ed Godfrey, Ermine Algaier, Beth Lawson, Kime Lawson, Karen Schnitker, Kin Cheung, and Brian McAdams. Outside of the Temple crowd, Christy Croxall deserves profound thanks for her generous friendship and for weekly phone calls that helped me maintain my sanity.

A researcher does not proceed very far without archives, and an archive reflects the character of its archivist. In this regard, I was privileged to have access to several
exceedingly useful archives. The bulk of my archival sources were found in The Burke Library Archive at Union Theological Seminary, where Ruth Tonkiss Cameron offered her time and perspective in several very enlightening conversations, and where Betty Bolden tirelessly pulled boxes from shelves, talked with me about what I was finding, and never failed to offer a warm, genuine. Brad Jones at The Riverside Church, too, surely has earned a star in his crown. Brad wears far too many hats as a volunteer at Riverside; when the church’s longtime archivist died in 2012, Brad added one more responsibility to his multitudinous array. Nancy Adgent at the Rockefeller Archive Center likewise was very helpful in connecting me with fruitful documents.

To my parents, Charles and Charlotte Gilmore, I owe a debt of gratitude beyond my ability to repay. I will leave it at this: for the constant encouragement to do what I love, to offer the best I can wrangle from myself, and to find satisfaction in the effort alone, I give my thanks. I can’t help but note, further, that each parent is reflected here in my words, even when those words have nothing whatsoever to do with them. From my father I have inherited a knack for placing words together in effective partnership, and from my mother a love, bordering on the obsessive, for the internal workings of the English language; the engineer is a poet, the yarn artist a linguistic architect, and I hope to have honored each.

Finally, Cathy Gilmore-Clough deserves far more than the sentences that I can offer here. She has sustained me throughout this long process in ways material and immaterial. Since mere words can’t capture what I owe, I offer only these few: This is for you. And, I love you.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

If one were asked to nominate the most representative American Protestant minister of the first half of the twentieth century, would it not have to be Harry Emerson Fosdick? All that those years strove for and aspired to were gathered up into his ministry—given a vibrant voice and turned into an impressive achievement. Thus, the story of his life is the story of his times—the biopsy of an epoch.

Albert C. Outler, in a review of The Living of These Days

On October 6, 1930, *Time* magazine ran a brief article marking the opening for worship of The Riverside Church building. Noting a pre-service inspection of the edifice the week before, the piece described the detectives standing guard as “straighten[ing] to attention” and craftsmen making “a show of their slow assiduity, as a small, stocky, energetic, bushy-haired, suntanned man—Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick—walked with authoritative curiosity” through the facility. The article offers comment on congregation, building, and community, beginning with a description of the scope of the church’s structure and activities and moving on to a character sketch of the pastor at its helm. *Time*’s unnamed writer describes Fosdick as “the man who inspired it and who as long as he is there, will be its centre of inspiration.” Further, the article crystallizes primary facets of Fosdick’s cultural presence, calling him “without doubt the most famed living Protestant preacher. Tens of thousands have heard him, millions have read him, hundreds have bared their hearts to him in private ‘confessional.’” Had *Time* been privy to the multitudinous letters Fosdick received from congregants and from members of his readership and radio audience seeking his counsel, they might have considered that final

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“hundreds” to be far too small an estimate. The point is clear: in the judgment of *Time* magazine, the inauguration of The Riverside Church stood as a culturally important event.

This was not *Time’s* only mention of Fosdick during the 1930s. Approaching the twilight of his professional career, after a decade that began with the Great Depression and ended with Europe gearing up for war—and in spite of the searing critiques of the liberal Protestantism that Fosdick represented by figures such as Reinhold Niebuhr and others who took on the mantle of Christian realism or neo-orthodoxy—Fosdick still carried cultural relevance. In an item focused on a sermon Fosdick had preached and that John D. Rockefeller, Jr. had reprinted and distributed “among U.S. businessmen, labor leaders and Congressmen,” the magazine still referred to the “fuzzy-haired, magnetic” Fosdick as the “most influential preacher in the U.S.” Clearly, during a troubled decade he had continued to articulate concerns that resonated across his multiple and overlapping audiences of congregants, readers, and radio listeners.

*Time’s* articles roughly bookend the period under consideration in this dissertation, which arose from a desire to examine how liberal Protestantism in America—and particularly that form of liberal Protestantism which was shaped by the reformist tradition of the social gospel—responded to the Great Depression. The story told here of Harry Emerson Fosdick, The Riverside Church, and the audiences who

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3 “To 50,000,” *Time*, July 3, 1939, 47. The sermon in question was titled “Jesus’ Ethical Message Confronts the World,” and was preached at Riverside on February 19, 1939. Rockefeller distributed it in June of that year under the title, “Dare We Break the Vicious Circle of Fighting Evil with Evil?” The sermon clearly reflects the growing certainty of a second world war, articulating Fosdick’s grounds for Christian pacifism. It was reprinted under its original title in *The Reference Shelf* 13, no. 3 (1939): 223-233, and in Harry Emerson Fosdick, *Living Under Tension: Sermons on Christianity Today* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1941), 161-171.
attached themselves to Fosdick through print and broadcast media is a narrative of liberal Protestantism and the social gospel as cultural presences that retained force within the early decades of twentieth century America. There is a certain tension involved in telling this story, insofar as recent scholarship in the field of American religious history has undertaken the important task of broadening the study of religious liberalism beyond the narrative of liberal Protestantism. As Leigh E. Schmidt has observed, that tension surrounds the issue of “how to break out of the all too prevalent equation of American religious liberal Protestantism without slighting the latter’s cultural force.” The issue, as he frames it, is that the “familiar Protestant stories remain important, but they have also become an impediment to seeing the broader impact of religious liberalism.” That is, they “represent a taming of the post-Protestant ferment through the maintenance of a clear Protestant groundwork; they establish a Protestant center and then sharply delimit the periphery.”

As Schmidt and other authors seek to expand the stories of American religious liberalism, however, intellectual historian David Hollinger argues that liberal Protestants, whom he labels “ecumenicals,” should not be dismissed too quickly. He argues that they remain a critical area of focus, if in relativized form, in part because persons “at least nominally affiliated with these denominations were in comfortable control of all branches of the federal government and most of the business world, as well as the nation’s chief cultural and educational institutions,” because the “public face of Protestantism . . .

remained in the control of the politically and theologically liberal ecumenists . . . until the 1970s,” and because they engaged in processes of self-interrogation and self-criticism by which they helped to decenter themselves from American culture. The liberal Protestants represented in this dissertation through the presence of Fosdick and Riverside stand somewhere in between the vision of a globally totalizing kingdom of God that could be discerned in the first iteration of the social gospel movement and the full-throated recognition of diversity seen in the latter part of the twentieth century. This study of the social gospel and its liberal Protestant proponents through the Great Depression period thus captures a moment of liberal Protestant transition, crystallized within the context of crisis. If the aims of the social gospel were only partially met, and if significant blind spots around race, class, and gender remained, Fosdick and Riverside—and Fosdick’s radio and print audiences—represent liberal Protestant means of finding personal grounding amidst depersonalizing social currents, and a religious vocabulary for critiquing those social forces which diminished the person.

The latter point calls for further explanation and contextualization. What I examine in this dissertation, through varied angles of approach, is a strand of thought and action within liberal Protestantism which I refer to as social gospel personalism. This involves the twining together of three related, but not coterminous, threads within the larger flows of American Protestantism: liberal theology and practice, social gospel cultural critique and activism, and personalist philosophy. None of these was a new

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phenomenon in the period under consideration; liberal Protestant theology in the
American context began to take shape in the early part of the nineteenth century, and the
social gospel and personalist philosophy each straddled the decades on either side of the
turn of the twentieth century. There had been decades of interplay and influence between
these three movements prior to the era with which this dissertation is concerned. What I
find in this study, rather, is that the confluence of the three took a particular shape within
the decades immediately following World War I, forming a rhetoric and practice that
both enabled and constrained response to the human and systemic costs of the Great
Depression.

The development of liberal theology and praxis within American Protestant
traditions may be traced to the early nineteenth century, arising among figures such as
Congregationalist-cum-Unitarian William Elery Channing and Congregationalist Horace
Bushnell; it was, that is, initiated and embodied by pastors who were struggling to make
intellectual sense of older orthodoxies which they no longer found either palatable or
tenable, and who sought to hold together the heritage of their Christian faith with
Enlightenment rationality. Over the course of the next century, liberal Protestantism
engaged and struggled with the development and dispersion of new scientific
knowledges—Darwinian biology in particular, along with psychology and the growth of

6 The most comprehensive analysis of liberal Protestantism in terms of its theological developments and
its key figures is the work of Gary Dorrien, The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining
Progressive Religion, 1805-1900 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); The Making of
American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900-1950 (Louisville: Westminster
John Knox Press, 2003); and The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, and
this subject is William R. Hutchison, The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism (Cambridge:
Harvard University Press, 1976). A contemporary work in the vein of church history that seeks to draw
on liberal Protestantism’s history in a new social context is Christopher H. Evans, Liberalism Without
Illusions: Renewing an American Christian Tradition (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).
the social sciences, and the development of higher criticism of the Bible—and by the start of the twentieth century had become an ascendant, transdenominational presence within American Protestantism, institutionalized within many of the leading seminaries and divinity schools and within the denominational bodies that are often denoted today as “mainline” Protestantism. While liberal Protestantism in the American context has historically evinced a diversity of thought, a core motivation has given the movement shape and definition. That common thread has been the attempt to offer a middle path between inherited orthodoxies and their rigid, untenable, even offensive dogma, on the one hand, and rationalistic atheism on the other. These two do not exhaust the available religious options. Rather, Protestant liberals have sought a via media both properly religious and rational. The liberal aim from the beginning was to articulate a faith that prioritized reason and experience and was free from the constraints of external authority, whether the latter be represented as creeds or as the Bible.

Because liberal Protestantism is not an essentialized entity extant in some sort of cultural vacuum, it has taken varied forms across different historical periods—even within particular periods. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, liberal

7 This is contested terminology. Elesha J. Coffman, *The Christian Century and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), argues for its utility as a widely understood label that, since the 1960s, has stood for a particular cultural and political form of Protestantism that developed over several decades. Arguing against Coffman, David A. Hollinger, “The Culture of the Mainline,” *Christian Century* 130, no. 10 (May 15, 2013): 34 contends that the term “gains its semantic traction from its association with a strong socioeconomic position and political connections, not from any religious properties of the object named,” and that it “lacks a credible opposite.” Jason S. Lantzer, *Mainline Christianity: The Past and Future of America’s Majority Faith* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), seeks to reclaim the term by making it more fluid, representative of shifting formations of influence. For the reasons outlined by Hollinger, and because the period under consideration here is prior to the era in which Coffman posits a generally recognizable referent, I generally do not use the term.

8 A dissertation which helpfully positions the struggles between liberal and conservative Protestants in New York City during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries as essentially pastoral in nature, differing evangelical responses to modernity, is Matthew Bowman, “The Urban Pulpit: Evangelicals and the City in New York, 1880-1930” (PhD dissertation, Georgetown University, 2011).
Protestantism’s engagement with evolutionary thought led to an emphasis on God’s immanence, not only within natural processes, but also within cultural development. Paired with this impulse was a general, idealistic optimism about the potential for human society to make a utopian reality of the kingdom of God.\textsuperscript{9} Liberal Protestants, as Matthew S. Hedstrom has noted, “since the nineteenth century had sought to redeem the culture through full participation in it.”\textsuperscript{10} Yet, the early decades of the twentieth century found a liberalism in crisis, with the horrific destruction of World War I challenging simplistic notions of human progress.\textsuperscript{11} The continued development of mass culture, further scientific and technological advances, and ongoing industrialization and urbanization—which liberal Protestantism had since the mid-nineteenth century sought to conceptualize and respond to—added to the sense of crisis which characterized the liberalism of the 1920s and beyond. Liberal Protestant engagement in American culture came with an awareness of struggle—struggle for a form of Christianity that would best be equipped to respond to, participate in, and shape the modern world.

The interwoven strands of rapid industrialization, the ever-increasing growth of cities, and massive immigration of peoples who were not Protestant—or, often, even Christian—gave rise to the second movement within American Protestantism with which

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{9} Hutchison, \textit{Modernist Impulse}, 2-6 argues that these two sensibilities were inherent within liberal Protestantism. Dorrien, however, argues cogently that this overidentifies liberal Protestantism with the particular formations it took in the Progressive Age, rendering it all but invisible after the critiques of figures such as Reinhold Niebuhr in the 1930s. Dorrien rightly notes that Niebuhr and others denoted as Christian realists or neo-orthodox were liberals who critiqued liberalism using liberalism’s own techniques and methods. See Dorrien, \textit{Making of American Liberal Theology}, 2:1-20.
\item \textsuperscript{11} For an analysis that finds some lingering notes of an American belief in progress via the strenuous moral and physical exertion of engagement in war, see Jonathan H. Ebel, \textit{Faith in the Fight: Religion and the American Soldier in the Great War} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). David L. Chappell, \textit{A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), also notes the continued salience of the belief in human progress that could be found in segments of liberal Protestantism into the 1960s.
\end{itemize}
I am concerned. The social gospel critiqued industrial abuses, called for a concept of universal “brotherhood,” supported labor unionism to varying degrees; it was a response to rapid social shifts that evidenced human compassion in the face of suffering, but also anxiety in the face of difference.\footnote{Early historiographic interpretations of the social gospel movement include C. Howard Hopkins, \textit{The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940); Aaron I. Abell, \textit{The Urban Impact on American Protestantism, 1865-1900} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1943); Henry F. May, \textit{Protestant Churches and Industrial America} (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949). See also Robert Handy, \textit{The Social Gospel in America, 1870-1920: Washington Gladden, Richard T. Ely, and Walter Rauschenbusch} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966); Ronald C. White, Jr. and C. Howard Hopkins, \textit{The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America} (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976). Early interpreters in particular tended to underplay the fear of racial and religious others which was a social gospel motivator. This anxiety can be seen in early social gospel texts, however; see, for instance, Josiah Strong, \textit{Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis} (New York: Baker and Taylor, 1886).} In its most prominent late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century form, it may be plausibly suggested that the social gospel, viewed through the personages and institutional networks who came to be seen as its predominant core, was a form of acting upon pastorally what liberal theology was theorizing about. For a key segment of the social gospel movement, that is, liberal Protestant theology offered theoretical tools with which to offer criticism and enact reform. Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch, two of the most prominent expositors of the social gospel, undergirded their writings with liberal theological conceptions.\footnote{See, for instance, Washington Gladden, \textit{Applied Christianity: Moral Aspects of Social Questions} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1886); Walter Rauschenbusch, \textit{Christianity and the Social Crisis} (1907; repr., New York: Harper and Row, 1964); and Walter Rauschenbusch, \textit{A Theology for the Social Gospel} (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1917).} A central concept within their social gospel was the establishment of the kingdom of God as an earthly reality—that is, through the creation of justice and the conditions of human flourishing, conditions that supported rather than disfigured the individual spirit and thus lessened the likelihood of individual sinfulness, human political and social activity could be directly involved in the return of Jesus and the establishment
of God’s earthly reign. This idea, that harnessing social scientific knowledge and human agency could be salvific, was a direct outgrowth of the ethics derived from liberal historical biblical scholarship. Additionally, the social gospel soteriology that considered sin to be social as well as individual in nature, and that construed social and individual salvation as inextricably linked together, was of distinctly liberal origin.

The social gospel did not start out as a movement that was more or less contiguous with liberal Protestantism. Historian Robert Handy has noted that expressions of Protestantism that engaged social issues—generically referred to as social Christianity—ran across a theological spectrum from conservative to liberal. The Salvation Army, for instance, presents a case study of a Protestant tradition that was decidedly not liberal in timbre but which developed an active response to the conditions of urbanization. However, in the early decades of the twentieth century, conservative Protestants tended to consider social activism to be a distraction from the evangelistic work of stirring personal conversions. Thus, the social gospel that features in this dissertation is primarily liberal in its temperament.

There have been some important scholarly critiques of the ways in which the social gospel movement has been portrayed. Particularly trenchant have been those analyses that have illuminated how an early generation of historians construed the social gospel movement as being primarily an undertaking of elite, white men. More recent generations of historians have thus attended better to issues of race and gender in the

enactment of the social gospel; African Americans developed and deployed social gospel insights, and women in the American South utilized social gospel theology in creative ways. The social gospel that is found within these pages, then, is part of the broader category of Christian activism that aimed to create social conditions that would maximize individual and collective well-being in an attempt to instantiate a divinely sanctioned vision of justice. I use an elite, northern minister and his elite, northern congregation as a focal lens on that segment of American Protestantism that embedded theological liberalism and social gospel activism within its institutional structures, recognizing that they do not exhaust the possibilities, but that they do represent a prominent and influential embodiment of the social gospel.

Finally, as far as the social gospel is concerned, what I am considering in this dissertation is the second iteration of the movement. The challenge that World War I presented to liberal notions of progress had similar implications for the social gospel, insofar as the version of the social gospel that had become embedded within Protestant institutional networks was intellectually funded by liberal theology. Early interpreters tended to note this visceral challenge and the subsequent retrenchment it caused—indeed,

many social gospel reformers had expected the war to inaugurate a more just world order but faced instead the hardening of nationalisms and disillusionment over Christian possibilities—and to assume that it spelled the death of the movement. While the war severely tempered the mood of optimism, however, and while it caused reevaluation of strategies, possibilities, and priorities, the general scholarly consensus now is that it did not sound the death knell of the social gospel movement. As early as 1954, Paul A. Carter began the work of tracing some of the dynamic continuities between postwar Christian social critique as articulated in denominational publications and the earlier social gospel writings. Subsequent scholarship has been far more likely to recognize ongoing transformation and reassessment, rather than simply disarray and dissolution. This study is thus concerned with a movement which had altered, but which also demonstrated continuity with its earlier iteration.

The third element within American Protestant that forms a key aspect of this study is personalist philosophy, or, more broadly, what Dorrien refers to as “the religion of

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16 This assumption may be seen in later works, as well, such as Heather Warren, Theologians of a New World Order: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Christian Realists, 1920-1948 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).


18 For instance, Curtis, Consuming Faith, offers brief analyses of a number of figures who were active before and after the war under the general rubric of social gospel. Eugene McCarraher, Christian Critics: Religion and the Impasse in Modern American Social Thought (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), points to social gospel theological roots in twentieth century political liberalism, suggesting that, though the social gospel has gone “underground” due to the decline of institutional religion, it may yet reemerge.
personality.” ¹⁹ This was a distinctly liberal phenomenon that formed a trenchant point of intersection between liberal theology and the social gospel. Liberal Protestant theology at the turn of the twentieth century was profoundly influenced by the philosophical tenet of personalist idealism, which was most thoroughly articulated by Borden Parker Bowne at the Boston University School of Theology. ²⁰ In Bowne’s hands, personalism—which posited personality as irreducible—functioned simultaneously as a proof for the existence of God and as the ground for ethics, as every individual personality is bound up with and impacts every other personality. Personalism thus fed from and nurtured liberal Protestantism’s concerns for the sacredness of the individual and individual experience; as formulated by Bowne and adapted by a second generation of his students and interpreters, “Personalist philosophy and theology taught that personality (experience) is the key to reality and that life (experience) is the test of truth.” ²¹

As a key element of liberal Protestantism in the early twentieth century, personalism was about more than a theosophical stance, however. For one thing, it entailed ethical concerns that interwove it with social gospel critique and activism. Historian Ralph Luker points, for instance, to three tenets of personalism—God’s “impartial interest in humanity, the unqualified value of human life, and the essential unity of the human race”—that, in the first decade of the twentieth century, formed the basis of social gospel engagement with racism and racial violence in America. ²² It also included the liberal Protestant embrace of psychology, which was tied to what Hedstrom

denotes as “the liberal search for a universal essence of religious experience.” To this end, liberal Protestant thinkers found much to admire and use in William James’s psychology of religion, particularly as articulated in his 1902 text *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which recognized experience as the key link between the self and the other. Matthew Hedstrom insightfully quotes in this regard Quaker mystic Rufus Jones, who argued in *Social Law and the Spiritual World* that, “If we could drop our plummet down through the deeps of one personality we could tell all the meanings of the visible world . . . and all the secrets of the eternal Personal Self.” Personality, that is, served as the modern conception of the soul, and understanding, supporting, and developing personality became a key function of religion.

This was not an entirely new idea within liberal Protestantism. Dorrien notes of mid-nineteenth century clergyman Henry Ward Beecher, for example, that he “preached liberal theology to a mass audience [and] conceived true religion as the flourishing of personality.” As Beecher preached in a sermon entitled “Follow Thou Me,” “If the Roman Catholics can prove that they make better men than we protestants [sic] do, that ends the argument with me. I am going in for the sect that makes the greatest number of men of the best sort.” What Beecher illustrates, then, is a liberal Protestant focus on the development of character; the task of religion was to enable the formation of persons who would make ethical contributions to society. In the decades immediately following World War I, that remained an aim of liberal Protestantism. A changed culture, however,

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resulted in some changed rhetoric. This was in part a result of the rise of mass culture, with the ever increasing availability of mass produced goods, and the shift from a producer to a consumer-oriented economy; cultural historians have described a concomitant transformation from concern for the development of stable character to the creation of fractured, malleable, multiple series of selves that could be projected as personality.\(^{27}\) The liberal Protestants of the twentieth century’s early decades present a challenge to a simplistic utilization of this argument, though. While increasingly turning toward the insights of psychology and adopting modern language of personality, they evinced continued concern for the notion of character as something stable, produced through discipline, exertion, self-sacrifice. For instance, in his 1943 bestselling work, *On Being a Real Person*, Fosdick argues that “predictable character is one of the highest ethical goods” which is the mark of “a whole person, with a unifying pattern of thought and feeling that gives coherence to everything he does.” That is, “integrity of character” points to an individual’s “integration of personality.”\(^{28}\) Personalism, then, involved liberal Protestants in an endeavor that sought the conservation of past values even as they embraced the conditions of modernity.\(^{29}\)

Hedstrom points out an important caveat to the foregoing which helps to delineate the subjects of my own study. Attention to personality and the deployment of psychological insights among liberal Protestants in the early decades of the twentieth century did not necessarily manifest in liberal politics; theology and politics were not

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\(^{29}\) Hedstrom, *Rise of Liberal Religion*, 39-49, applies this line of argumentation to the development and marketing by liberal Protestants in the 1920s of Religious Book Week.
contiguous. Hedstrom differentiates between what he terms “laissez-faire liberals” and “mystical and ethical liberals.” The former blended William James, psychological concepts, and the mind-cure tradition to “argue for the practical, material benefits of religion,” typically neglecting the practices of mystical spirituality and wider ethical concerns; this was a personalism decoupled from social gospel impulses. Hedstrom argues that liberals of this persuasion, including such individuals as Henry C. Link, Emmet Fox, Glenn Clark, and Norman Vincent Peale, formed the core of what has been historiographically treated as the apotheosis of a therapeutic culture devoid of politics that was the necessary endpoint of liberal Protestantism’s championing of personality. However, there was a countertradition of liberal Protestants who embraced personality and the modernization of pastoral care while also retaining commitments to social activism and prophetic religion. 30 It is this group of liberal Protestants, represented in these pages through Fosdick and through The Riverside Church, with which I am concerned; all three vectors of thought are important to this study. That is, I am working at the confluence of liberal Protestant theology, personalist ethics, and social gospel activism, convinced that it is in examining the blending of the three that the query of how the social gospel fared through the Great Depression may be answered. This is thus a study of social gospel personalism as a formation of liberal Protestantism whose particular shape in the 1920s and 1930s came in the wake of global conflict, the efflorescence of mass culture, and the crucible of economic collapse, holding together the social gospel tradition of critique and activism with the liberal emphasis on developing and nurturing individual personality.

It is to this end of examining social gospel personalism as a liberal Protestant means of navigating cultural change and economic upheaval that Harry Emerson Fosdick and his congregation at The Riverside Church become a lens through which to approach the question from multiple angles of view. The first point to raise in this regard is a pragmatic one of prominence: As the *Time* articles cited above indicate, Fosdick was already a nationally significant figure by the time the Great Depression had commenced, and he remained one throughout the following decade. Indeed, he published his first book, *The Second Mile*, in 1908, and subsequently authored a number of devotional texts that sold well—and about which he continued to receive appreciative correspondence from readers decades later. His fame—and notoriety—was enhanced within the context of the so-called fundamentalist-modernist controversies, a period of intense contestation within Protestant denominations, especially among Presbyterians and Northern Baptists. Fosdick was instrumental in New York City’s becoming a particular flashpoint in these controversies in May 1922, preaching a sermon entitled “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” The sermon, and its subsequent nationwide distribution, ultimately cost the Baptist preacher his pulpit at New York’s Fifth Presbyterian Church, but it also helped to cement Fosdick’s reputation as one of the premier voices of liberal Protestantism.

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Fosdick’s credentials as a liberal Protestant operating at the intersections of the social gospel and personalism were impeccable. He had earned his divinity degree at Union Theological Seminary, one of the bastions of liberal Protestant training, where he subsequently became a professor. Teaching at the seminary, however, was always secondary to his vocation as preacher. For Fosdick, liberal Protestant theology and practice was pastoral at heart, not simply an academic exercise. In 1931 he preached “A Fundamentalist Sermon by a Modernist Pastor,” positing a vitality in “old-fashioned” Christianity that moderns sometimes missed, in contrast to their “forefathers.” “They understood,” he contended, “that religion is not simply activity but receptivity.” Further, “They did not join so many committees as we do but they understood better the meaning of prayer. Sometimes, in consequence, there emerged a personal, spiritual power that puts us to shame.” Similarly, in 1935, Fosdick argued that “The Church Must Go Beyond Modernism,” contending that, “Our modern world, as a whole, cries out not so much for souls intellectually adjusted to it as for souls morally maladjusted to it, not most of all for accommodaters [sic] and adjusters but for intellectual and ethical challengers.” From within, Fosdick challenged liberalism to revitalize its connection to practices of heart and mind which had endured in Christianity through the ages—thus positioning liberal Protestantism as the inheritor and carrier of Christianity’s animating spirit.

Fosdick likewise serves as a helpful window on the social gospel because his career began when the social gospel’s first iteration was at its peak and he was an integral personage in its subsequent rethinking and repositioning. Fosdick encountered the social

34 Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick*, is the standard biography.
gospel during his seminary training, and the practical and challenging pastoral experience he garnered in New York City’s Bowery neighborhood was as eye-opening for him as Walter Rauschenbusch’s pastorate in the Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood had been for him a generation before. Fosdick graduated from Union in 1904, and was serving his first church three years later when Rauschenbusch brought the social gospel to its clearest point of articulation in *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, which Fosdick said “furnished welcome force” to the conviction that “social liberalism was . . . essentially Christian.”  

Fosdick’s early writings, especially *The Meaning of Service*, made particularly clear that the social gospel was fully resonant with his convictions. When the First World War began, Fosdick was like many social gospelers who saw hope for the establishment of a Christian world order in the wake of the destruction, and supported the war effort; afterwards, he was again like many social gospelers who repented of that support and worked to make Christian pacifism a signature social gospel issue in the next decades. At Riverside, he consistently held together in his preaching a gospel that was simultaneously personal and social, and though he sometimes spoke of the social gospel as a movement in the past tense, he told a national radio audience in 1934 that one of the key religious responses to the economic crisis would be “a fresh grasp on the social gospel and fresh courage in preaching it.”

Fosdick likewise demonstrated a strong commitment to personalism, which permeated his pastoral approach and undergirded his social gospel activism. This may be seen in the consistent comments he made about industrial abuses, racial hatred, political

corruption, and other social and material conditions that hampered and deformed individuals’ development of healthy and strong personalities. It is also reflected in his direct involvement in various activist causes, and in the lending of his name to many and diverse social organizations. Fosdick’s personalism likewise reflected the liberal Protestant embrace of psychology and of the pastoral counseling movement. This embrace arose from personal experience; Fosdick endured a suicidal depression while still in seminary, which he later characterized as the inspiration for his book, *The Meaning of Prayer*, which remained a bestseller for decades. The growth of pastoral counseling overlapped the second iteration of the social gospel, again making Fosdick, who was a proponent of both, a useful focal point for examining the social gospel as it headed into the Great Depression. Indeed, for Fosdick, insofar as psychology could be harnessed for the purposes of developing people’s personalities, it formed a key element of the social gospel.

Two other factors, both of which have already been alluded to, make Fosdick a particularly salient subject for this study: the interrelated elements of his location in New York City and his deployment of mass media. As noted above, Fosdick’s sermon, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” played a significant role in placing New York at the center of the debates that roiled the Presbyterian and Northern Baptist denominations in the 1920s. The relationship, however, was symbiotic; it was the reproduction and dissemination of

the sermon, as much as its content, that helped to make it so inflammatory, and Fosdick’s New York City context enabled this. New York City was a financial and cultural center, and the distribution of the sermon was made possible because John D. Rockefeller, Jr. funded it. Relatedly, the publishing houses that distributed Fosdick’s books across the country and around the world were based in New York City, making the city and Fosdick’s contacts there inseparable from and indispensable to his presence within mass media. For instance, Eugene Exman, who arrived in the city in 1928 to head the religion department of Harper and Brothers—which published all of Fosdick’s books from that point to the end of his career—became both a parishioner and personal friend of Fosdick’s through Riverside.42 The city thus positioned Fosdick to take advantage of the mechanisms of mass media, which he did so effectively through his books and his articles in popular magazines that Dorrien remarks, “By 1920 he was a major figure in liberal theology; by 1930 he would have been the movement’s most influential advocate even if he had written nothing else.”43

Print, however, was not Fosdick’s only platform. As the 1920s progressed, he gained a further medium: the radio. Radio, concomitant with the proliferation of book culture, helped to signify the triumph of a consumer economy, with mass goods and mass communication available to more and more people. As radio networks formed in the late 1920s, radio authorities sought the participation of religious communities—such as those represented by mainstream Protestant denominations and their ecumenical institutional networks—to legitimate the medium. Fosdick and his contemporaries were keen to utilize the new medium to disseminate their message. And as the Great Depression settled in,

radio became an indispensable source of information and entertainment. Fosdick, as both author and broadcaster, thus becomes an important lens for studying how the liberal Protestantism that he represented negotiated the crisis and its attendant changing social terrain.

If Fosdick was an exemplar of social gospel personalism, his pastoral context at The Riverside Church was likewise nationally prominent. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. himself began to court Fosdick for the pastorate of the Park Avenue Baptist Church, which would become The Riverside Church, during the period of the fundamentalist-modernist controversies. Fosdick’s association with Rockefeller and the church that the latter had helped finance played a role in extending Fosdick’s influence, but so did Fosdick’s national reputation help to enhance that of the church. The church building, begun prior to the onset of the Depression but finished afterward, was conceived of as a liberal Protestant cathedral, a crystallization of an imagined Christian past, simultaneously distant in the hearkening to the Gothic and near in the resonance with the institutional church movement, which broadcast the best of what the Protestant church was capable in both its theological message and its social mission. And because there is no pastor without a congregation, it is the religious life lived out between and around the walls of The Riverside Church that helped to cement Fosdick’s own significance. Thus the congregation and its building, the aesthetic calculations and the material cost, the patterns of practice and the philosophy of community belonging and engagement which it embodied, become ripe subjects for examining how social gospel personalism fared as
the 1920s turned into the 1930s and the global economy disintegrated with very local ramifications.44

Having elucidated why Fosdick and Riverside are such ripe subjects for my study, it remains for me to outline how I will proceed and the contributions I aim to make. I approach Fosdick, Riverside, and the question of social gospel personalism leading toward and through the Great Depression from several angles. The chapters here address, respectively, an analysis of Fosdick’s message as found in his sermons and books; Fosdick’s presence within mass media, both print and broadcast, and the impact of mediation on the reception of his message; the creation and deployment of religious space in the Riverside Church building as a manifestation of social gospel personalism; and an examination of Riverside’s response to the crisis of unemployment that crippled New York City as the 1930s unfolded. Throughout, I seek to be attentive to issues of class; the social gospel personalism embodied through Riverside is a particularly classed phenomenon, simultaneously evincing some of the class (and, for that matter, race and gender) blind spots that ran through much of the social gospel movement and demonstrating religious means by which middle class people navigated cultural and economic upheaval.

The first two chapters are complementary in nature. My analysis of Fosdick’s message during the 1930s demonstrates his rootedness within the social gospel tradition

and illustrates the ways in which personalism shaped his homiletics throughout the Depression, particularly noting the psychological emphasis manifest in his conceptualization of preaching as personal counseling carried out at the group level. Of especial import is the conclusion that Fosdick’s personalism, in conjunction with the real and presumed privilege of his congregation and imagined audience, allowed for the psychological in some sense to overtake the political in his social gospel. This may also be seen by noting the double meaning of “depression” that characterized the era, making it a pertinent period for examination. On the one hand it may denote the economic crisis faced by Fosdick and his congregation and broader audiences; on the other hand, it may also denote the growing awareness of and emphasis within Fosdick’s pastoral praxis on the mental, emotional, spiritual condition of individuals. The social milieu in which Fosdick was embedded at Riverside led him to place greater emphasis on the latter. This does not mean that the social gospel critique that was twined with personalist ethics disappeared; rather, Fosdick saw his parishioners as agents of influence within the social world, and frequently preached from the assumption that attention to their inner lives would enable them to find stability within turbulent times and to catalyze the social transformation for which the social gospel aimed.

In conjunction with the first chapter, the second more intentionally embeds Fosdick’s message and its reception within a wider cultural context. Because liberal Protestantism’s social gospel personalism cannot be fully explained with reference to one minister’s thought, I examine the dissemination of Fosdick’s work as a locus of his interaction with his audiences. I consider Fosdick within an era of increasing mass mediation, analyzing how print and broadcast versions of his message functioned as sites
of religious communication and experience. This entails attention both to the dynamics involved in the production and dissemination of Fosdick’s mediated messages and to their reception and utilization by his audiences. Delineating the contours of liberal Protestant utilization of the mechanisms of mass media demonstrates means by which institutional leaders sought to act as custodians of a rapidly changing world, simultaneously and somewhat ironically seeking to conserve a prior generation’s moral values—including core social gospel convictions—by embracing modernity’s mass culture and technology. I pair this institutional analysis, however, with an engagement of Fosdick’s audiences. Drawing on correspondence from congregants, readers, and radio listeners, I argue that the processes of mediation, by which Fosdick’s message became a consumer good, helped to heighten and reinforce the psychological, therapeutic content. The dynamics of mass society could be disorienting, and the sense of intimacy fostered by print and radio helped to reorient people. Fosdick’s audience correspondence indicates that many readers and listeners experienced his mediated message as addressing their particular existential needs and concerns; while many in his audiences agreed in principle with the social convictions which he conveyed, the finding of interior strength and individual spiritual resilience during a troubled time seemed to take priority.

The third chapter addresses the Riverside Church building itself, attending to the ways in which the church’s geographic location and decisions about its architecture helped to frame a religious space intended as an embodiment of and catalyst for the values inhering within social gospel personalism. As noted above, the building helps to frame the periodization of this study, as the planning and initial construction phases began in the late 1920s, but the completion and full utilization of the space waited until
1931. The class implications of the movement for which Fosdick and Riverside stand as a synecdoche become apparent in particular ways through the Riverside edifice, as well. The facility was constructed specifically for Fosdick and financed largely with Rockefeller money, illustrating what I consider to be a fundamental irony of the social gospel movement: namely, that it was dependent upon for its existence some of the prime movers of the very capitalist industrial system that it critiqued. Rockefeller’s vast monetary contributions were held in tension with the desire to uphold the broadly participatory ethic of the social gospel, and I explore several strategies through which the church sought to navigate this. Yet, the participation sought, both in terms of financial giving and in terms of service to the community, arose from and reinforced a middle class sense of noblesse oblige. Fosdick repeatedly challenged his congregation to justify the massive expense of the church building through undertaking equally massive social service endeavors. What also becomes clear in my analysis of the church building, however, are the ways in which the facility served to foster a sense of stability. The Gothic architecture, for instance, evoked an imagined Christian past, conjuring a sense of timelessness and continuity amid the troubling changes of modernity and economic decline. The multipurpose nature of the structure bore a direct line of descent from the institutional church movement that was concomitant with the social gospel. Even more significantly, the church tower, which echoed in many respects the vertical organization of the urban skyscraper, was imbued with the explicit values of enabling personal connections and equipping parishioners for service to the wider world.

In the final chapter, I explore Riverside’s enactment of a social gospel rooted in personalism via their response to the unemployment crisis in New York City. This is, in
essence, an analysis of how Fosdick’s homiletical rhetoric regarding a gospel that intertwined personal and social concerns was carried out programmatically by the Riverside congregation. The chapter contextualizes The Riverside Church’s response to the crisis by first considering the broad network of relief efforts that were carried on throughout the city and which involved both religious and civic actors. I examine both Fosdick’s personal activism and the church’s benevolence program as means of socially enacting the gospel in a way that promoted human well being. The larger portion of the chapter is given over to case studies of two of Riverside’s specific programmatic responses to the unemployment crisis: the Sewing Room and the Emergency Employment Service. My examination of the church’s rhetoric surrounding these programs indicates that they were seen as means of outreach by which the church could publicly enact the gospel by attending both to the material and the psychological needs of participants. In addition, the Emergency Employment Service echoed social gospel aims of effecting systemic transformation by providing the church an opportunity to offer a public witness that would demonstrate to state agencies how to create more humane conditions in the process of meeting the needs of the vulnerable.

Ultimately, this is a story of middle class white Protestants seeking to make sense of a world that was undergoing massive cultural dislocations. The nexus of liberal theology, social gospel critique and activism, and personalist philosophy had undergone transformations and challenges; liberal theology was under fire from conservatives, World War I broke any sense of inevitable progress fueling the first iteration of the social gospel, and some personalists lost track of its ethical tenets as they embraced health and success as ends in themselves. In Fosdick and Riverside, the three strands remained
twined together. However imperfectly, and with blind spots related to class, race, and gender clearly on display to the later observer, Fosdick and his church represented and broadcast a social gospel personalism in a turbulent era that, if heightening the importance of interiority, nonetheless attempted to do so in service to the greater good. The values of social gospel personalism, preached from the pulpit, broadcast through print and over the airwaves, constructed in the Riverside building, and enacted in social service endeavors, formed the ground from which middle class people who were anxious over a changing world that was held in the throes of economic disintegration could find personal grounding and could offer a response that allowed a sense of meaningful religious action.
CHAPTER 2
A PREACHER PREACHES: FOSDICK’S DEPRESSION-ERA MESSAGE

Introduction

In March 1930, Harry Emerson Fosdick received a letter from O.T. Gilmore, a Student Counselor at Brown University who wrote to share “some of the good work your little book The Manhood of the Master is still carrying on.” The book was an early, devotional text that had grown out of a series of lectures and discussions in the Men’s Bible Class at Fosdick’s first pastorate, the First Baptist Church of Montclair, New Jersey. It focused on the various facets of Jesus’ character, upholding him as the ideal by which human character is to be judged. Though it had been published in 1913, Gilmore wanted Fosdick to know that it had lost none of its power during the intervening years. To this end he quoted at length a letter sent him by a student who had been “mentally broken” but was “now recovering,” who had borrowed the text from Gilmore and hoped simply to pay him for it rather than have to part with it, and who had this to say about its role in his recovery:

My greatest protection during my attacks of mania (which are even as painful and agonizing as extreme depression) when delusions oppress me, and everything seems wrong and hopeless, is the reading or quoting of inspiring passages from Goethe and other sources. Fosdick’s accounts of the life of Christ are the best selections I have ever seen. Today I was terribly upset; my work went poorly; I could concentrate only with difficulty, the old feeling of unreality swept over me to an unusual degree, and I felt completely forsaken. I happened to open Fosdick’s book to page 150 and read of Christ and His depression at the garden of Gethsemane: “And he saith unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful even unto death; abide ye here and watch. And he went forward a little, and fell on the ground, and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass away from him. And he said, ‘Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; remove this cup from me; howbeit not what I will, but what thou wilt.’”
And by reflecting on this scene and its significance, I managed to carry through that period of anguish.¹

Fosdick would have keenly appreciated the revelation that his book had played a prominent role in the student’s recovery of mental health. He had suffered a mental health breakdown of his own in 1901 while studying at Union Theological Seminary, which played a key role in the formation of his pastoral praxis. He later named it as the underlying event that spurred his 1915 book, *The Meaning of Prayer*, which was still in 1930 a perennial bestseller.

Those early volumes thus spoke to deeply personal concerns and psychological needs. The emphasis on the personal was not confined to the earlier volumes, though; throughout the decade of the 1930s, Fosdick’s printed and oratorical output was filled with the language of personality. In this respect, he was like virtually every liberal Protestant of his era, influenced by the personalist idealism that had been articulated in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries by Boston University School of Theology’s Borden Parker Bowne and his followers. Bowne argued that personality is irreducible, serving simultaneously as a proof for the existence of God—the cosmic intelligence which was the condition for the existence of a reality outside of and independent from human consciousness—and as the basis of the conviction that individuals are inextricably embedded within networks of relationships such that every individual action has consequences not only for the actor, but for other people as well. In liberal Protestant thought, the working out of this idea as an emphasis on individual worth was well established by Fosdick’s time, and was the organizing principle behind

¹ O.T. Gilmore to Harry Emerson Fosdick, March 14, 1930, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2B Box 2 Folder 10. Underlining in original.
his ethics. For Fosdick, personalism was the ground from which individual and social
gospel alike proceeded; he would have denied any dichotomy between the two. While, as
Dorrien notes, Fosdick “was not a religious philosopher” and “could not have taught a
seminar on metaphysical idealism,” he was a skilled interpreter who made a popular
version of personalism available to the multitudes in his audiences.2

Of more immediacy to Fosdick’s utilization of “the religion of personality” than
Bowne’s philosophical treatises, however, were William James’s psychology of religion
and the socially engaged Quaker mysticism of Rufus Jones.3 As Matthew Hedstrom
notes, “The liberal approaches to religion found in James and Jones—intellectually
engaged, psychologically oriented, and focused on personal experience—characterized
large swaths of middle-class spiritual life by the middle of the twentieth century.”4 In his
autobiography, Fosdick contends that “William James . . . inspired my generation as few
men did,” and marks his reading of Jones’s Social Law in the Spiritual World, published
in the year Fosdick began his ordained ministry, as “a memorable event in my life.”5
Jones himself had delivered the lectures that comprised that volume as a means of
making insights such as those found in James more accessible to lay people. His language
of becoming persons or achieving personality, his assertion that, “Personality at every

2 Gary Dorrien, Economy, Difference, Empire: Social Ethics for Social Justice (New York: Columbia
University Press, 2010), 357. On Bowne and the personalist school, see Dorrien, The Making of
American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900 (Louisville: Westminster John
Knox Press, 2001), 335-392, and Dorrien, The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism,
Realism, and Modernity, 1900-1950, 286-355. See also Borden Parker Bowne, Metaphysics (New
3 The phrase is from Gary Dorrien, Making of American Liberal Theology, 2:540.
4 Matthew S. Hedstrom, The Rise of Liberal Religion: Book Culture and American Spirituality in the
5 Harry Emerson Fosdick, The Living of These Days: The Autobiography of Harry Emerson Fosdick
level involves interrelation,” and his prioritization of religious experience over doctrine and creed resounded throughout Fosdick’s work.6

In Fosdick’s homiletical approach, personalism placed human personality at the center of divine creative and redemptive attention and as the simultaneous driver and aim of social change. His sermons were filled with exhortations to vitality, implorations of the reader and auditor to connect with a God greater than the human self who would help that human self reach its highest potential. Within the context of the Great Depression, this general thrust both informed and, in some sense, outweighed specific references Fosdick made to cultural, political, and economic circumstances, and may fairly be characterized as forming the ideological core of his message for catastrophic times. This is not to suggest that Fosdick shied away from addressing social ills in his preaching and writing, for that is definitively not the case; rather, it is to note that, during the Depression just as in the earlier phases of Fosdick’s ministry, personalism was the ground out of which his social gospel convictions grew. Or, to utilize the metaphor of illness, Fosdick’s overwhelming aim was to articulate a religion that would strengthen individuals in a sick world and provide them with resources to make it healthier.

This chapter analyzes the content of Fosdick’s cultural production during the Depression era, paying attention to the ways in which he sought to blend the personal and the social in his message as a means of gauging how the social gospel and liberal Protestantism of that time responded to the crisis. Fosdick took very seriously the idea that religion was both personal and social; in his mind, the two could not be disarticulated, though in rhetorical practice he displayed something of a tendency to filter

the latter through the former. This was a discursive outgrowth of his utilization of personalist philosophy as his dominant interpretive lens. Fosdick represented a shifting element of the social gospel movement, one that, as Dorrien has noted, increasingly deployed psychological and therapeutic language during the 1930s. While this period forms my primary area of concern, it is first necessary to review some of Fosdick’s earlier ministerial output and activity in order to firmly situate him within his social gospel lineage. Based on this history, it will then be possible to explore his corpus thematically, looking at his 1930s pronouncements upon topics of concern to the social gospel movement. I will also draw upon some of Fosdick’s work from earlier eras in order to demonstrate continuity, and sometimes tension, between Depression-era Fosdick and his earlier work. Ultimately, I will argue, it is helpful to see Fosdick in this period as attempting to respond to a double meaning of depression: the Depression as economic and social reality, and depression as it connotes psychological health or lack thereof. The overall thrust of his message was that the latter took primacy, forming the realm in which even the realities of the former were first experienced. Thus, Fosdick’s 1930s social gospel, while not devoid of political and social concerns, was largely one in which interiority provided the key for addressing those very concerns.

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A Therapist’s Couch of Millions

Fosdick’s social gospel heritage and its reverberations in his 1930s work will come into focus momentarily; first, however, it is necessary to offer brief comment on the lens through which all of Fosdick’s oratorical and written concerns were focused. Philosophically speaking, as has been noted, that lens was personalism. But at the level of practical outworking of the preacher’s theoretical knowledge, the level at which the preacher addressed the congregation, Fosdick’s sermons may fairly be characterized using the phrase he names in his autobiography as the aim of any sermon: “personal counseling on a group scale.”8 Leonora Tubbs Tisdale offers the assessment that “Fosdick’s preaching, teaching, and writing caught the imagination of millions of people in the United States and around the world because he was, first and foremost, empathetic.”9 The young man who had experienced the depths of depression during his ministerial training became the preacher who sought actively to respond to the existential concerns of all those who listened to and read him.

It requires only a glance at the titles Fosdick chose for his sermon collections to discern that therapeutic concerns commanded a great deal of his homiletical attention during the Depression era. The Hope of the World resonated with traditional Christian language addressed to a hopeless time. The Secret of Victorious Living, The Power to See It Through, and Successful Christian Living suggest their pages will contain primers on perseverance, overcoming, and practical tips for maintaining confidence in an age of uncertainty; the latter title doesn’t reveal at a glance whether the emphasis ought to be

8 Fosdick, Living of These Days, 94.
placed on its first or second word. Certainly, they read as aspirational treatises directed toward those for whom the heaviest impacts of the country’s crisis had been existential and psychic rather than material, though they carry the possible connotation that the latter may also be ameliorated by addressing the former. That Fosdick did not propound this correlation, at least not directly, is at some level immaterial; the book titles nonetheless bespeak his prioritization of mental health, the subsuming of the social within a practical approach to personal spirituality.

Sermon titles are likewise telling. The onset of the Depression brought “Making the Best of a Bad Mess,” preached at Riverside on March 2, 1930 and over the air three weeks later. Fosdick preached about “Religious Living as a Fine Art” on March 30, 1930. Late the next year, he offered guidance to his auditors “In the Day of Adversity.” The next February brought “A Religious Faith for a Discouraging Year,” and Fosdick sought in 1933 to orient his hearers “In a Day of Confused Moral Standards.” Similar themes rang through Fosdick’s sermons later in the decade, as well, with such titles as, “Man’s Critical Need of Interior Stability” (October 3, 1937 at Riverside, on the radio that October 31), “The Springs of Surplus Power” (October 17 and November 7, 1937), and “The Appalling Sense of Inferiority” (October 30 and December 18, 1938). While many of Fosdick’s sermons manifested robust social concerns, his primary avenue of

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11 Technically, the sermon was preached at Temple Beth-El to what would become the Riverside congregation. After leaving the Park Avenue Baptist Church building in early 1929, but before the Riverside Church building was complete in late 1930, Temple Beth-El hosted Fosdick and his congregation. For the sake of simplicity, however, and because it was the same congregation, I will shorthand the preaching location of any such transitional period sermons which I reference as having taken place at Riverside.
approach, even at the level of titling his work, was via personal interest. And, as will become clear, personalism was the primary, though not the only, means through which Fosdick addressed social concerns.

**An Heir to the Social Gospel**

Washington Gladden, a prominent early proponent and formulator of the social gospel, sought to reassure his Columbus, OH congregation in the late nineteenth century that social Christianity held plenty of room for individual religion. He tried to hold the two together in an oddly bifurcated manner, preaching personal religion on Sunday mornings and offering sermons on social salvation on Sunday evenings. Fosdick, standing within Gladden’s tradition of evangelically-based liberalism, attempted to move beyond this dichotomy, blending personal and social concerns together within his sermons. He had been profoundly influenced by the early social gospellers while studying at Union and then upon assuming his Montclair pastorate in 1904; in his autobiography, he credits Walter Rauschenbusch with flavoring much of his early preaching. Rauschenbusch and Gladden both died in 1918—deaths which, along with the failure of the Kingdom of God to become manifest in the world after the conflagration of the Great War, marked a significant turning point in the social gospel movement. Dorrien names Fosdick among key Protestant leaders of the era who “tried to revive the social gospel” in the years after the war. This situates Fosdick firmly within the social gospel movement. The following offers examples from his pre-Depression ministry in order to anchor interpretation of his ongoing involvement in the 1930s.

While the social gospel movement grew out of a Protestant desire (and anxiety) to address issues arising from urbanization, industrialization, and immigration, issues of war and peace became increasingly prominent in the early decades of the twentieth century as the world headed toward global conflict. For those leaders who had been active in the social gospel movement as it hit its apex with the publication of Walter Rauschenbusch’s *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, World War I was full of terrible promise.

Rauschenbusch himself, a man of sensitive conscience and German heritage who had awakened to the social implications of Christianity while serving a congregation of German immigrants in the Hell’s Kitchen area of New York City, disagreed vehemently and paid dearly for it in terms of public esteem; he died a nearly broken man in the war’s final months. Other leaders prominent in the movement, however, approached the war with a peculiar hopefulness. While war exacts the steepest of costs, many social gospelers evinced a confidence borne of the theological hope that it would prove to be a cleansing fire that would usher the Kingdom of God into a global social reality. The utter failure of this hope to come to fruition led to a mood of penitence eventuating in dejection and rejection, but also in fragmentation, strategization, determination, and renewed vigor.

Fosdick mirrored the larger movement on both sides of the war’s divide, having functioned as something of a cheerleader for the war only to become a key proponent of

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Christian pacifism in the 1920s and beyond. Susan Curtis rightly argues that the Great War played a tremendous role in shaping his conception of the social gospel and his approach to leadership and preaching.\textsuperscript{16} As the United States geared for its entry into the conflict in 1917, Fosdick had addressed the situation in \textit{The Challenge of the Present Crisis} as one which held open the possibility for real and significant change: “Education, fraternalized commerce, social idealism, international law, and Christianity—these are not ready for the discard. They are humanity’s great hope. This war is not so much an occasion for despair concerning them as it is a challenge to a better understanding and a finer use of them.”\textsuperscript{17} The rest of the volume justifies the use of force even while condemning war and militarism. Fosdick closes by citing a letter from a French mother to her son in Canada, telling him that his two brothers had been killed defending the nation. “Your country needs you,” she wrote, “and while I am not going to suggest that you return to fight for France, if you do not return at once, \textit{never} come.” Sounding a similar note, Fosdick reflects, “Multitudes are living in that spirit today. He must have a callous soul who can pass through times like these and not hear a voice, whose call a man must answer, or else lose his soul. Your country needs \textit{you}. The Kingdom of God on earth needs \textit{you}. The Cause of Christ is hard bestead and righteousness is having a heavy battle in the earth—they need \textit{you}.”\textsuperscript{18} Curtis rightly notes that the war gave Fosdick the opportunity to preach the gospel of an interdependent world to audiences of soldiers with a much wider range of persuasions than was found in his Montclair congregation, and he returned from his YMCA work in France to do what he felt was some of his best

\textsuperscript{17} Harry Emerson Fosdick, \textit{The Challenge of the Present Crisis} (New York: Association Press, 1918), 6.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 86-87.
preaching. Curtis likewise points out, however, that in the aftermath of the war, as it became clear that the world was not so open to decisive change, the same vitality the war had kindled in him became characteristic of his antiwar work.19

By 1922’s *Christianity and Progress*, Fosdick already sounded a bit chastened, decrying, for instance, the economic costs of militarism that could have instead gone to fund deficit reduction or education even as he maintained an overarching theme that progress toward a better world remained a worthwhile and realistic goal for Christians to pursue.20 In his autobiography he states of *The Challenge of the Present Crisis*, “It is the only book I ever wrote that I wish had not been written. To be sure, it is not so bad that it could not have been worse. . . . But the book’s main objective, the defense of war, I now repudiate.”21 That repudiation was embodied within his post-1918 career and extended beyond his official retirement, and included such facets as public statements in favor of U.S. participation in the League of Nations and the outlawing of war, participation in the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation, and advocacy on behalf of conscientious objectors.

Economic issues were likewise central to the social gospel, and Fosdick was not averse to commenting on, if not thoroughly elucidating, economic topics from his pulpit and in his writing. Again, if the brief era of the social gospel movement’s apotheosis may be pegged to the 1907 publication of Rauschenbusch’s *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, then it is well worth noting once more that this was the era of Fosdick’s first pastorate. The First Baptist Church of Montclair, NJ, was a congregation that Fosdick biographer Robert Moats Miller describes as “patrician” in a town of 21,550 people where white

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19 Curtis overdetermines the relationship between Fosdick’s social gospelism and his war regrets, but her observations are nonetheless valid.
21 Fosdick, *Living of These Days*, 121.
residents were demonstrating anxiety over the relatively new presence of some 2,000 African Americans and 1,500 Italian immigrants in their midst. During the first three years of the pastorate, Fosdick commuted between Montclair and Columbia University, where he earned an M.A. in Political Science in 1908. Miller notes that his work included “courses in Communistic and Socialistic Theories, Theories of Social Reform, Principles of Sociology, Social Evolution, Fiscal and Industrial History of the United States, and Railroad Problems”—in other words, courses which aligned him with the central concerns of the social gospel movement. One outgrowth of these studies was Fosdick’s determination to use his ministerial position to address the labor and racial tensions in Montclair. To this end, he helped establish a social club for the town’s union men—an endeavor enabled by the connections he made with union leaders during his research. The club folded, which Fosdick diagnosed as resulting from a lack of “social sympathy” between people of different backgrounds, though another likely factor was the club’s location in a prominent area in the center of town, which probably felt less than inviting to many of the union members. Nonetheless, the salient point is that in his impetus to action, in the class and economic emphases that informed that action, and even in the naïveté that contributed to the failure of the particular action, Fosdick proved himself a social gospel exemplar.

His early writing also reflected the social gospel’s concerns about labor and capital relations, presaging interests that would resonate throughout his career. One might look, for example, at a 1912 article Fosdick wrote for Outlook magazine examining the previous winter’s labor strikes in the mill town of Lawrence, MA—a strike harnessed and

22 Robert Moats Miller, Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet (New York: Oxford University Press), 64.
taken charge of by the Industrial Workers of the World. Fosdick’s analysis was relatively understanding of the mill owners’ position, and glossed over deprivations faced by the immigrant millworkers, but he was also quite sympathetic to the IWW leaders and to labor’s cause, decrying dehumanizing working conditions. While his conclusion was hardly radical, he did insist that the problem was one of “gigantic social forces.” One doesn’t have to strain too hard to hear echoes of Rauschenbusch.²³ These concerns persisted after the war, too, as Fosdick was part of the Federal Council of Church’s Committee on the War and the Religious Outlook, which in 1920 produced a report entitled The Church and Industrial Reconstruction, critiquing American laissez-faire capitalism.²⁴

Issues of race and racism did not claim a position of prominence in the thought of the early white social gospel thinkers, though they were not ignored entirely.²⁵ Looked at from another perspective, it is plausible to argue that one of the key drivers of the social gospel’s formation was racial anxiety over the massive influx of non-Protestant immigrants into urban areas in the late nineteenth century. Social gospel pioneer Josiah Strong’s tome Our Country is a key example in this regard, positing immigration as one of seven key perils facing the nation.²⁶ At the same time, social gospelers stood against the worst of America’s racial abuses. In a University of Pennsylvania doctoral dissertation, Michael Janson notes that liberal Protestants worked for anti-lynching

legislation in the 1920s and for employment equality in the 1930s. He highlights as of especial importance Federal Council of Churches President Robert E. Speer’s 1924 book *Of One Blood: A Short History of the Race Problem* for its naming of racism as one aspect, along with sexism and imperialism, of a “philosophy of force” that legitimated war and oppression and that “could only be truly solved via Christianity.”

Fosdick’s alignment with this mode of thought may be seen in his 1920 devotional volume *The Meaning of Service*, which completed a trilogy that began with *The Meaning of Prayer* and *The Meaning of Faith*. The final volume makes especially clear Fosdick’s social gospel pedigree, placing him in the same school of thought as Rauschenbusch on the question of interpreting religion in terms of service to the world. In a chapter on the concept of justice, he addresses the issue of racism, linking it with economic strife and strained international relations as problems that may be solved through practices of human sympathy and identification. “Justice says: You are a white man. Then put yourself in the place of the Negro, whose father was freed when he was a youth, and whose great-great-great-grandfather was brought over against his will on a slave ship from Africa, and see from the inside, how the problem of that man’s life must appear to him.” Likewise, Americans should put themselves “in the place of Britain, and France, and Italy, and Japan, and China” to gain a better understanding of global problems and tensions. And labor “must see from [the employer’s] angle the perplexing problem of our economic life,” just as employers must empathize with laborers. Placing

the personal firmly at the root of the social, Fosdick argued that systemic social issues
would be addressed personally: mutual regard and sympathy would lead “a man . . . to
attack the organized injustice of our social and economic order, not because he himself is
hurt, but because others are oppressed, in whose place he has imagined himself to be.”

Preaching the Social Gospel During the Depression

By the time the Depression settled in, Fosdick enjoyed a multifaceted cultural
presence. Riverside’s opening had drawn national attention; just after the first worship
service was held in the building, but prior to its dedication, Time described the new
structure as “a place of greatest beauty for worship,” where Fosdick proposed “to serve
the social needs of the somewhat lonely metropolite.” His words proliferated through
broadcast and print, reaching ever further; Dorrien claims that, “by 1930 [Fosdick] would
have been [liberal Protestantism’s] most influential advocate even if he had written
nothing else.” He was well positioned to address a nation becoming more and more
aware that it had a serious economic problem on its hands. As he had done for the better
part of three decades, when the Depression took hold, the preacher preached. And, as
Leonora Tubbs Tisdale has written of Fosdick’s preaching, he “brought to his
proclamation a love for people, a pastoral sensitivity to his listeners’ problems, a deep
faith in God, and an evangelical desire to convince modern people that embracing the
Christian faith would not only improve the well-being of their own lives but could also
strengthen the moral and spiritual fiber of their church, nation, and world.”

29 Fosdick, Meaning of Service, 104.
30 “Riverside Church,” Time, October 6, 1930, 71. On the Riverside building, see chapter 3.
31 Dorrien, Making of American Liberal Theology, 2:364.
32 Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, “Preachers for All Seasons,” 60-61.
were, perhaps not surprisingly, intended to challenge, to provoke, to move, to reassure, to teach, to comfort, and, as Tisdale notes, to convince.

Evincing the double meaning of “depression” as an economic crisis and a psychic state, much of Fosdick’s preaching, shaped as it was through his personalist convictions, harnessed even his social gospel grounding in the service of providing a spiritual and psychological intervention. Fosdick himself seems to buttress this reading in a 1932 article for Review of Reviews and World’s Work. The editors introduce the piece as containing Fosdick’s “views on the function of a minister in a time of economic and social crisis.” Fosdick then argues that “Surely, our present civilization cannot survive and ought not to survive as it is. And only as it succeeds more intelligently than it has been doing in adjusting itself to the facts of the new world can it reasonably hope for continuance.” He asks what the minister’s task is in light of this, and offers this primary answer: If Western civilization were dissolving, “all the more need for a profound personal religion. Whatever else the Christian minister can or cannot do, he can help to build personalities strong in faith and character, so that inwardly steady they can do what they think they ought to do and endure what they have to stand.” Secondly, the Christian minister ought to help build “the church of the future,” an organization that will provide an alternative both to small-minded variants of Christianity and to irreligion and that will be socially useful. In other words, Fosdick offered a social gospel description of the minister’s task in a time of crisis—but a key (though not the sole) task of that social gospel lay in seeking to bolster individuals as a means of upholding the social good. As he states it in his 1932 sermon “The Service of Religious Faith to Mental Health,” “vital

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Christian faith . . . does release interior resources of spiritual power” which will be key to social reorganization. 34 “Look out in imagination on that world we left today and must go back to tomorrow. If ever out of its chaos order comes and a more decent world for our children after us, who will be the builders of that better day? We may be sure of this: it will be the healthy-minded.” Indeed, “The healthy-minded must build the better day, and we never will get a robust, vigorous, radiant, hopeful, healthy-mindedness out of the kind of irreligion that reduces man to a hapless victim stumbling by accident into a universe that does not want him.” 35

Fosdick’s continued articulation of the social gospel tradition within his preaching, along with the modifications he placed on it as the nation settled into the Depression, are crystallized in two sermons he preached on subsequent Sundays in late 1932. On November 20, Fosdick preached on “Christianity’s Stake in the Social Situation,” followed the next week by a sermon taking his audiences “Through the Social Gospel into Personal Religion.” 36 In the former, he situates himself firmly within the social gospel tradition, arguing that Christianity is social as well as individual in nature. By way of example, he echoes statements about foreign missions he had used a decade earlier in his Cole Lectures, printed as Christianity and Progress. He notes that missionaries who initially took Bibles into foreign countries found themselves becoming educators so that people could read and utilize those Bibles; and that, to undergird their educational work, they had to become physicians in order to address the medical and sanitary needs of those whom they were educating. Purely individual religion, in other

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34 Fosdick, Hope of the World, 51. Italics in original.
35 Ibid., 57. Italics added.
36 Ibid., 21-38.
words, is a paradoxical concept, for the individual is inevitably embedded within the social. With this context, then, Fosdick spends the rest of the sermon deploring conditions in the world, lamenting the cost of war to those who fight it and the harm caused by the economic situation to the formation and upholding of families. “Any church that pretends to care for the souls of people but is not interested in the slums that damn them, the city government that corrupts them, and international relationships that, leading to peace or war, determine the spiritual destiny of innumerable souls” would be open to Jesus’s charge of, “Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” In an interesting turn, he upbraids (albeit in general terms) the economic system while letting its participants at every level off the hook, personally: “Our economic order sometimes seems to me almost as bad for the people who profit by it as for the people who are ruined. . . . Any social order that crushes anybody is bad for the character of everybody.” Here Fosdick echoes the traditionally irenic tone of the social gospel, hoping for the conversion of players at all levels to tactics of cooperation rather than of class struggle. Yet, he does quote approvingly Marx’s dictum that, “Philosophers have only interpreted the world differently, but the point is to change it.”37

Thus, the gospel according to Fosdick was thoroughly social; yet, the flip side was that it was also abidingly personal. “Through the Social Gospel into Personal Religion” starts from the perspective of hypothetical reformers thoroughly uninterested in personal religion. This was to make the same mistake as those Christians who contended that the Church had no business involving itself in social questions, simply approached from the other side of the dichotomy. Both sides were equally wrong. The solution to a

37 Ibid., 27-28.
Christianity that retreated from the social sphere in favor of a supposedly exclusively personal religion was not to jettison the concept of personal religion altogether, for personal and social religion are inextricably intertwined. Rather, Fosdick’s primary contention here is that all social evils, such as “the war system,” come “out of individual souls.” Thus his bottom line is that, “All social transformation goes back to somebody’s sensitized conscience. . . . All social advance starts with somebody’s sensitized conscience.”

There is no individual religion without social religion, and no social religion uninterested in the individual; the personal and the social are imbricated. This was the guiding principle of Fosdick’s articulation of social gospel concerns. Or as he puts it in “A Plea for True Individualism” (1933), “Jesus certainly was an individualist. At any rate, while his ultimate goal was a new social order, the kingdom of God on earth, that collective hope was rooted back in indefatigable care about the endless worth and possibility of the individual.”

Yet further, as he argues in “Christian Attitudes in Social Reconstruction” (1936), “Christianity tries to change men’s souls in order to change their societies, and it tries to change their societies in order to give their souls a chance.” In the remainder of this section, I thematically engage Fosdick’s pronouncements during the 1930s on issues that were key to the articulation of the social gospel during the interwar period.

*War and Pacifism*

The social gospel movement arose in the late nineteenth century in a context of rapid urbanization, industrialization, and immigration. As such, economic issues were at

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38 Ibid., 33-34.
the fore in the movement’s first generation. However, as noted above, the Great War, with its steep human cost and the bitter disappointment of its failed promise, spurred a reconsideration and reprioritization of social gospel principles. For Fosdick, penitent self-evaluation of his role as a clerical war-booster subsequently made antiwar work the most visible aspect of his social gospelism in the 1920s and into the 1930s; indeed, Dorrien argues forcefully that pacifism was the signature issue of postwar social gospel liberals in the U.S., calling it, “the only social gospel cause that attracted popular interest.”

Fosdick’s own prioritization of antiwar work within the social gospel is evident in “The Sermon on the Mount.” Contrasting the ethic of Jesus with an ethic of power which he shorthands under the name of Nietzschean philosophy, he argues that

Note that in our Western world he have given Nietzscheanism a long, fair chance. In our business, in our industrial expansion, in our imperialism, in our national policies, in our Nordic myth calling ourselves the superior race, we have given Nietzscheanism a long, fair chance. And in these recent years we have seen one climactic outburst and exhibition of it. Do you like it? Do you think that it is sensible?

He then elucidates the consequences of “the last war” as prime outcomes of that philosophy. What is striking about this is that Fosdick chose this 1926 sermon for inclusion in 1933’s *The Hope of the World*. Indeed, this sermon and 1927’s “Christianity’s Supreme Rival,” which is a searing indictment of jingoistic nationalism, are the only two selections in the volume that predate 1930.

Fosdick often timed his most explicitly antiwar sermons for occasions such as Memorial Day, when militarism and war were in the civic eye through rituals of

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42 Fosdick, *Hope of the World*, 152.

43 Ibid., 156-166.
remembrance or even glorification. His best-known sermon on war was “The Unknown Soldier,” which he delivered at Riverside on Armistice Day in 1933 and which was subsequently reproduced, in altered form, in *The Christian Century* and *Reader’s Digest.* Tisdale notes that the date of the sermon’s original delivery was also “a day celebrating the international establishment of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier to honor those who died in the Great War.” In eloquent and moving rhetoric, Fosdick publicly repents of his earlier role as cheerleader for war, discussing his own experiences as a battlefield chaplain in France and saying he was “a gullible fool [who] thought that modern war could somehow make the world safe for democracy.” He denounces the system of modern warfare, which demanded the conscription and sacrifice of the young and the strong, and implores his nation to join the World Court and the League of Nations and to work tirelessly for disarmament. He closes with searing self-dedication,

> At any rate, I will myself do the best I can to settle my account with the Unknown Soldier. I renounce war. I renounce war because of what it does to our own men. . . . I renounce war because of what it compels us to do to our enemies. . . . I renounce war for its consequences, for the lies it lives on and propagates, for the undying hatreds it arouses, for the dictatorships it puts in place of democracy, for the starvation that stalks after it. I renounce war and never again, directly or indirectly, will I sanction or support another! O Unknown Soldier, in penitent reparation I make you that pledge.  

Drawing on his own wartime experiences for rhetorical power was not a new move for Fosdick. He spoke from a visceral level to offer poetic force in the service of awakening the Protestant conscience. On April 24, 1931, he offered one of the addresses at the semi-annual dinner for *The World Tomorrow,* the publication of the Christian

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45 Tisdale, “Preachers for All Seasons,” 72.  
pacifist organization Fellowship of Reconciliation, in which he argues that the church cannot stop war on its own, because that task requires international cooperation, but that it has a vital role to play in terms of the moral, spiritual, and educational awakening required for a dawn of global peace. He evinces awareness of the political and economic forces at work in international conflict, calling for shared solutions in the pursuit of peace. Near the beginning of the address, he argues powerfully that the personal renunciation of war is not nearly enough, for, “Individualism in the peace movement, by itself, means the defeat of the movement.”

Yet, in a move at once ironic and consistent with his intertwining of the social and the personal, he hews to the climax of “The Unknown Soldier” and brings the address to a rhetorical climax offering a litany of the grounds for his personal hatred of war:

I hate war. I hate war because I have seen it. I hate war for what it does to our own men. I have seen them come in freshly gassed from the front line trenches. I have watched the long, long trains loaded with their mutilated bodies. I have heard the raving of those who were crazed and the cries of those who wanted to die and could not. I hate war for what it forces us to do to our enemies, slaying their children with our blockades, bombing their mothers in their villages, and laughing at our breakfast tables over our coffee cups at every damnable and devilish thing we have been able to do to them…. I hate war, and never again will I sanction or support another!

In other words, individual hatred of war is not enough—but, for the social gospel-driven liberal Protestant personalist preacher, it remained the starting point and the most effective means of mobilizing and upholding the larger movement necessary to achieve war’s end. Fosdick frequently deployed a homiletical strategy of appealing to an event in an extraordinary person’s life as a means of constructing a memorable illustration. In this

47 Harry Emerson Fosdick, “Can the Church Stop War?” The World Tomorrow, June 1931, 187. 48 Ibid., 188.
case, the extraordinary person, the individual with the vivid and visceral experiences, was himself; his audiences were invited into his own psychic reconstruction of war’s hell as a means of coming to believe, or reinforcing their belief, that everything possible must be done in order to remove warfare as a viable option for the resolution of international conflict. The issue was decidedly social, but for Fosdick, the most direct means of creating a new, pacifist, social reality was through rhetorically shaping and reshaping the individual conscience.

The appeal to individual consciences does not mean by any measure that systemic issues were absent from Fosdick’s preaching and writing about war. It is true that he did not generally propound policy positions, consonant with his philosophy that the preacher was meant to offer a message that somehow transcended the issues of the day, placing everyday life in contact with a larger reality. Even so, he regularly attached his name to clergy-driven messages directed toward political actors, and frequently inserted into his preaching his support for U.S. participation in the League of Nations and the World Court. He was not averse to leavening his homiletical discourse with statistics on occasion if it would help drive home his larger point. In his 1934 Armistice Day sermon, for instance, he argues that, “Peace is a positive achievement involving an organized world community of law and order which we must want so much that we are willing to pay the full price that it costs.” Part of that cost would be the belief in the efficacy of violence, which he illustrates by citing statistics on the percentage increase of 1934 military expenditures over 1913 levels. More often, his diagnosis of causes was generalized but pointed, as in 1933’s “Facing the Challenge of Change.” In this sermon,

Fosdick argues that change could be dangerous, but that failure to change could be even more dangerous, and he ties both the Great War and the Great Depression to social stasis, contending that, “We tried too long to stay still in an individualistic, militaristic, nationalistic system when the circumstances of the world were moving.” The social gospel rings clearly in these sentiments.

Yet, as with many such comments in Fosdick’s work, his overall aim was to help those individuals who made up his audiences adjust and live faithfully and morally, with strong religious convictions, in the midst of upheaval. While claiming the church’s collective responsibility to create change that challenges the status quo, he also idealizes “a man—how we do admire him when we meet him!—who, facing the changes of the passing years and the growing world, hears ever the call for thinking more deeply and living more effectively.” And, “Whether we are dealing with large matters or small, I suspect that there is no getting wisdom until one’s eye rests on the changeless amid change.” Without eschewing the need for systemic change, then, Fosdick advocates an attention to the internal states and resources of individual Christians as a vital means of and starting point for those very systemic changes.

*Class and Economics*

While pacifism and antiwar advocacy may have claimed a place of prominence in his thinking, Fosdick’s social gospelism was also inclusive of class and economic concerns. The pairing of these latter two categories is potentially misleading; placing them in concert does not indicate conflation. As Sean McCloud has argued, a primary misconception made about class lies in reducing it to material conditions when its

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51 Ibid., 111, 115.
functioning is multifaceted and interacts with other factors such as race, gender, age, and place. McCloud’s own conception of class is threefold, involving external imposition of labels in the process of forming group boundaries, internally utilized markers of self-representation, and the relative availability of or constraint upon various types of social and cultural resources.\textsuperscript{52} Class in this sense, particularly in regard to the third element of availability and constraint, runs unavoidably throughout Fosdick’s thought. I include it here because it becomes particularly visible as he addresses the economic conditions of his world in the 1930s. Thus, in this section I examine the general tenor of his economic pronouncements during that crisis decade, paying attention to the ways in which his class positioning and assumptions become evident.

Social gospel convictions come through clearly in a sermon such as 1931’s “The Hope of the World in its Minorities,” in which Fosdick concerns himself not so much with demographic minorities of race, class, or gender, but rather calls out to the minorities who would form moral aristocracies with the courage to stand up to the status quo as Jesus did. The following passage is representative of Fosdick’s social gospel heritage, his willingness to frame problems with some bluntness, and also of the lack of specifics he includes in his preaching:

Only the other day I was talking with my friend, a representative of a great corporation. This spring that corporation is casting off into unemployment, absolutely unprovided for, thousands of its men. My friend told me that the corporation had built up a surplus of many millions of dollars to protect the stockholders against emergency. The stockholders are safe against crisis for years to come but not one cent of financial responsibility has the corporation taken for its employees, now cast off into unemployment. [Fosdick’s friend, at least,] saw that the policy would never do, that it did not fit this new industrial order into which the

machine has introduced us, that business must take financial responsibility against emergency, not simply for investors of money but for investors of life and labor.\textsuperscript{53}

A number of germane observations call for notice in this excerpt. The first is simply the forthrightness with which Fosdick proffers the social gospel critique of modern industry, the devaluation of labor, the elevation of profits, and the immoral, concrete results of abstract principles of investor primacy. Gladden and Rauschenbusch would have been proud. The second, however, is to note that Fosdick’s preachment comes from a position of relative privilege; while it is clear that the friendship to which Fosdick so casually draws attention was not with the CEO of the “great corporation,” it was nonetheless clearly with “a representative” whose status at the company was elevated enough that he was not so vulnerable as were mere “employees.” Finally, granting that doing so would most likely have opened up a ream of problems for Fosdick, Riverside, and his friend, it nonetheless remains true that he does not name the “great corporation” which was behaving so shamefully. He thus manages to remain at a level of abstract generalization even as he uses a specific illustration to highlight a specifically problematic feature of corporate industrial life.

The concept of a moral aristocracy propounded in “The Hope of the World in Its Minorities” finds further articulation in 1933’s “Superficial Optimists, the Peril of a Serious Time,” in which Fosdick also echoes the longstanding social gospel hope that reform would forestall revolution.\textsuperscript{54} He insists that he is not distinguishing between educated and uneducated, privileged or poor in his call for “a genuine moral aristocracy,” asserting that the poor still held the healthy roots of the nation’s character. The moral

\textsuperscript{53} Fosdick, \textit{Hope of the World}, 9-10.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 136-144.
aristocracy he seeks resounds with echoes of middle class Victorianism: “good taste, sound character, personal integrity, simple living, faithful family life, unselfish public service.” There is some irony here, for while he trumpets these virtues as important for and attainable by all, his economic goal is a reformed capitalism that would be transformed through wise guidance. While arguing for a society-wide revival of spiritual life, in which a moral aristocracy composed of people from all walks of life might arise, Fosdick’s hoped-for resolution to the economic disaster is that the cultural, economic, and political gatekeepers would institute reformatory measures that might avert wider calamity. There is a tension here in which Fosdick on the one hand calls for a moral awakening in individuals as a means of transcending the Depression’s morass, while on the other hand he calls for practical solutions to be designed and effected by the elite.

This echoed a homiletical move he had made in a November, 1930 sermon which was subsequently abridged in *The American City* magazine. In “The War Against Unemployment,” Fosdick deploys his familiar personalist pallette to decry the ravages of mass unemployment on individuals and families, again tying together the personal and the social. “What we who try to apply the Christian Gospel to the social situation are interested in is just individual souls, the personalities of men and women and boys and girls,” he asserts. “But the more we are honestly interested in them the more we must care about the social situation that so terrifically impinges upon them.” He calls the need for relief “urgent and acute,” pointing the specter of starvation. Yet the solution that he offers, such as it is, makes clear his own class standpoint and that of his immediate auditors:
I would not plead so much for relief as for the dedication of the brains of this congregation to such study of the causes of unemployment as will help to prevent its recurrence. You men of science and of business created this new age and it took brains to do it. You have the brains. And you are under the most serious obligation to use them now to discern the causes and devise the prevention of this appalling menace.\textsuperscript{55}

The interesting point here is not so much that Fosdick would make recourse to experts; this was a familiar element of the social gospel, simply rearticulated within the particular circumstances of the Depression.\textsuperscript{56} Rather, in thinking of McCloud’s conception of class as involving availability and constraint, it is striking that, in his preaching, Fosdick’s insistence that the elite solve a problem which, implicitly, the non-elite are ill-equipped to handle highlights his own class standpoint and that of the congregation gathered around him.

The presumptive class status of Fosdick’s audience is made clear in comments from 1933’s “Christianity at Home in Chaos” and from “The Service of Religious Faith to Mental Health,” as well. In the former, Fosdick notes, “Some of you may be tempted to discouragement about Christianity even more than about the economic crisis.”\textsuperscript{57} And the latter opens with the assertion that, “We who stand at the human end of this breakdown of economic security are of course impressed by its physical consequences—downright hunger and destitution.” The bleak circumstances of the Depression are thus rhetorically conjured—“but,” Fosdick continues, “that is not half the story. The mental, moral, emotional consequences are far more terrific.”\textsuperscript{58} Such sentiments were most likely

\textsuperscript{55} Harry Emerson Fosdick, “The War Against Unemployment,” \textit{The American City} 43 (December 1930): 153.


\textsuperscript{57} Fosdick, \textit{Hope of the World}, 19.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 49.
to be presented, of course, by someone whose impressions of his own situation, as well as of the circumstances of his audience, allowed the discounting of the most severe material deprivations.

Fosdick was not unaware of his own class standpoint; certainly he knew that the air in Riverside was rarefied. Some of this awareness is on display in 1934’s “The High Uses of Trouble.”59 Here, Fosdick addresses the Depression and the unspoken but real complaint that people who had suffered its greatest costs might address to Riverside’s privileged congregation: “You cannot understand us.” He addresses to those privileged auditors the question of “what adversity is doing to us one by one.” To the hypothetical objection that the first order of business ought to be social reorganization that would allow everyone greater chances at happiness (a telling end in its own right), he responds, “You have heard that here many a time and will hear it yet again. But when we have gotten rid of all the trouble we can get rid of, there will be plenty left.” In essence, his message is one of psychological identification; he urges a congregation from whom the Depression had not taken everything to draw on their own experiences of troubled times as a means of identifying with those who would accuse them. “If you have had experience with trouble, use it now. . . . Translate anything you know about trouble into such constructive care for individuals and for the social welfare that somebody will have cause to thank God that once you yourself faced adversity, so that you can understand.” Social and economic change, in other words, would arise out of the increased ability of those with various forms of power to empathize with those without.

He returns to that theme in 1937 in “The Peril of Privilege,” in which he argues that the gospels show Jesus’s primary difficulties to be “with privileged people like ourselves.” Echoing the critical need for empathic identification, he notes that, “A man in an advantageous position, protected by comparatively comfortable circumstance, finds it hard keenly to feel what is wrong with the world”—doesn’t, for instance, know the oppression of the slums and the tenements. He acknowledges his own blindness in this regard, as well. Yet, even as he insists that he is addressing a privileged crowd—and perhaps because he is addressing a privileged crowd—he digresses long enough to employ a trope of the unworthy poor, describing what his topic would be “were I speaking to the underprivileged.” In that case, he “would talk to them about their temptations. . . . Many of the underprivileged are such because of their own laziness and self-indulgence. . . . Sin[’s] . . . demonic, corrupting power runs through all classes, and no realistic mind can suppose virtue to be preponderant in any special group, even the downtrodden.” Thus does Fosdick simultaneously profess differential class standpoints and a universal (and universally corrupted) human nature; thus does he offer words of challenge to his own class while reassuring them that they are other than the lazy poor.

As with his preaching on war, Fosdick’s sermonic comments on economics tended to observe the broad tableau of social issues from the narrower perspective of the individual. If for Fosdick the social and personal were ineradicably imbricated, he nonetheless had a propensity to localize the complex social within the relatively simpler, or more immediate, personal. For instance, in “A Religious Faith for a Discouraging

60 Fosdick, *Successful Christian Living*, 120-130.
Year” (1932), Fosdick ties the economic crisis to the aftermath of the Great War.\textsuperscript{61} He indicts Western nations for foolishly engineering their own problems by “loading nations with unpayable debts, rearing tariff walls against the very foreign trade on which our mutual welfare rests, [and] insisting on a narrow nationalism in a generation when all our major interests are international,” and, internally, “clinging in this country to old business policies such as are represented in the Sherman Anti-Trust Laws—that is to say, a small, competitive individualism—when I suspect that only large-scale cooperative planning in industry, under the government’s oversight . . . can save industry at all.” He notes that, even before the stock market crash, things were not going well for “the common man” in America, because the “prodigious wealth of this country had been segregated in too small areas with millions of people living too far below a decent maintenance.” Yet, the crux of the matter lay in the need for personal religion: “In a day like this, we need interior resources of spiritual power.” That power, of course, would enable “the creative faith to build a divine society.” That was the aim; even so, the sermon itself was aimed at individuals suffering discouragement.

At the same time, Fosdick may be seen as attempting to make the social gospel responsive in this era to the critiques leveled against it by Reinhold Niebuhr. In 1934’s “The Use and Misuse of Power,”\textsuperscript{62} as he had in “The High Uses of Trouble,” Fosdick makes social change secondary to personal change, asserting that, “No economic reorganization will work one bit better than our present methods do without something deeper.” That something deeper involves individual attitudes and behavior, and finds

\textsuperscript{61} Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archive at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 1A Box 12 Folder 10.
articulation in terminology that is strikingly Rauschenbuschian: “the Christianizing of the meaning and use of power.” Fosdick argues that the world operates from a Nietzschean power ethic, and that the Christian church thus needs to face this squarely lest it send its young people into that social world wielding only an idealistic love ethic. Here it is clear that Niebuhr’s *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, with its screed against liberal Protestantism’s naïve assumption of inexorable progress driven by the love ethic, stood firmly between Fosdick and his earlier social gospel understandings. He seeks, then, to rhetorically bring the love ethic into the service of power, the latter made to carry no content unshaped by the intentionality of the former. “You have power; what are you doing with it? . . . To be a Christian means to take in your strong hands the love-ethic and go out into this pagan world to live by it, believe in it, adventure on it, sacrifice for it, until we make it victorious in the institutions of mankind.”

To be sure, Fosdick was capable of searing critiques of the contemporary structure of capitalism that did wend their way into conclusions dealing with his audiences’ psychic states. In “The Christian Interpretation of Life—A Terrific Fact” (1932), Fosdick quotes statistics demonstrating that corporate dividends had risen from 1928-1930 even as wages went down. He then takes his audiences somewhat to task with a litany of statistics demonstrating capitalist injustice, arguing that, “because we tried to keep prosperity without adequately sharing it, we lost it.” Even more explicitly, in “The Ethical Foundations of Prosperity” (1935), Fosdick highlights the mutual relation of war and economic imperialism, arguing that both make prosperity impossible, asserting that,

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“There can be no prosperity without social justice.” The explicit naming of the problem in sermonic form is noteworthy:

We had often talked about the moral regrettableness of our inequality of income but now maldistribution has become one of the chief economic problems of mankind. For the crucial matter with us economically is that we need consumers—we need them tremendously. Under our capitalistic system we have wrought one of the most amazing miracles in history, the creation of a productive system of supplying anything that mankind may need. But we need consumers who can buy what can be produced and there are not enough of them. We had supposed it was only an economic question, but Jesus was right: ethical questions precede, underlie, dominate economic questions. . . . The ethical test of every economic process therefore is that it is primarily devoted, not to making money for a few, but to enriching the life of all.65

He goes on from there sounding very much like Washington Gladden, offering a hypothetical illustration of a Southern light and power company that provided a social good, but whose operation was controlled by a group of people in the North who filtered it through numerous holding companies to inflate value so that they could reap artificially magnified personal profits from the provision of a public good. He ends the sermon by upholding the principle of governmental control of such social goods. The personalist concern for human flourishing necessitated a general policy statement.

Clearly, then, the social gospel’s economic concerns remained a significant element of Fosdick’s output during the Great Depression. He could be quite blunt, as he was in “The Ethical Foundations of Prosperity;” Miller notes that Fosdick’s 1930 sermon, “The Ghost of a Chance,” in which he contended that capitalism itself was on trial, prompted U.S. Congressman Hamilton Fish, Jr., chairman of a House committee investigating “Reds,” to name him as one of the “pink intellectuals and sobbing

socialists.” Whether he was addressing its effects or advocating for their amelioration, though, certain emphases are evident. First and foremost is Fosdick’s general assumption that his audiences, whether filling the pews of Riverside, listening on radios, or reading purchased books, did not exist at social and economic margins—a fact that reveals a certain self-awareness on his part along with, perhaps, an impulse that may be labeled variously as noblesse oblige or simply a common identification of liberal Protestantism as a custodian of culture. Secondly, he was temperamentally averse to offering policy prescriptions; in “In the Day of Adversity” (1931), he asserts that economic changes were needed but claims that it was not his “business here one way or another to sponsor special economic theories” beyond the conviction that “business is sacred, that economic life is always basically a matter of human relationships.” Yet even as he hesitates to spell out particular courses, Fosdick aims in his corpus to inspire thought that would eventuate in action. Thirdly, Fosdick’s social gospel economics clearly, though by no means exclusively, articulate a prioritization of interiority, locating the potential for social change within individuals. Finally, then, the economic statements present in Fosdick’s preaching and writing, his primary modes of interface with his audiences, reveal the conviction that, whether dealing in salved discouragement or bolstered consciences, the social gospel would be best actualized through psychology.

Race

In the realm of racial politics, Fosdick was a faithful mirror of social gospel-inflected liberal Protestantism’s antiracist ideology, in action as well as in rhetoric. Miller

66 Miller, Harry Emerson Fosdick, 469.
67 Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 1A Box 6 Folder 42.
notes, for instance, that he was a longtime sponsor of the National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax; that in the 1930s he was a member of the Sponsoring Committee of the Scottsboro Defense Committee, having earlier convinced alleged Scottsboro case victim Ruby Bates to recant her perjured story; that he appealed to Congress to pass antilynching legislation; and that in 1935 he signed a “friend of the court” brief on behalf of Angelo Herndon, an African American Communist who had been prosecuted in Georgia for leading a protest march of unemployed African Americans and whites.\(^{68}\) One example of race in his preaching may be seen in “The Peril of Worshiping Jesus” (1930), in which Fosdick addresses racism as one of a number of social sins confronting the nation and even countenanced by Protestant churches. “The churches of this country are full of people who worship Christ, who have no more idea what Christ means about war, race relationships, the color line, about the money standards of the day, the profit motive in industry,” he argues, “than Constantine had about Christ’s attitude about bloody imperialism.” As far as racism goes, “Jesus would care more about our attitude towards the color line or war than he would care about all our processionals, however stately, and all our architecture, however fine.”\(^{69}\) There is an implicit assumption, of course, that “the churches of this country” were primarily filled with white people. Nonetheless, Fosdick had enunciated a fair rendition of the postwar social gospel stance on racism.

Similarly, in “On Being Christians Unashamed” (1937), Fosdick exhorts hearers and readers to develop “a whole philosophy of life” that claims the “majestic movement of the human spirit inspired by the Divine,” working in counterpoint to the shame and disgust engendered by the wretched state of affairs in the world. One key element of such

\(^{68}\) Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick*, 457; Miller addresses Fosdick’s legacy on race in 449-463.

\(^{69}\) Fosdick, *Hope of the World*, 102.
a philosophy needs to be monotheism, which bears as a moral implication “the doctrine that all men and women, of all nations and races, have one Father and are one family.”

If this was not exactly a robust platform for full racial equality, it did offer a theoretical framework—however problematic in its lack of specificity and its ignorance of particularity—for undermining racially based hierarchies.

Perhaps Fosdick’s most explicitly antiracist homiletic production during the Depression era was 1934’s “A Plea for Goodwill.” In it he takes for granted that members of his audiences harbored prejudices of various sorts, explaining that, “I never yet have preached a forthright sermon about prejudice without having some people indignantly walk out on me.” In fact, this sermon starts from a different scriptural citation, but covers much of the same territory as an earlier sermon, “The Sin of Prejudice” (1927). Both employ a key illustration about an art teacher whose friend stopped interactions with her because she agreed to accept a Japanese student. Both argue that “prejudice impoverishes its possessor.” And both utilize a version of the phrasing that prejudice indicates “a belated mind,” that is, a mind that has not evolved beyond primitive clannishness. In the 1934 version, Fosdick lays somewhat more emphasis on the evolutionary nature of overcoming prejudice and racism, expressing some surprise that there was not even more hostility in light of the relatively recent and overwhelming amalgam of peoples pressing together in cities who did not have the evolutionary time to become accustomed to each other. “The wonder is not prejudice; the wonder is that we have gone as far as we have with goodwill. . . . Surely, one must feel that when one

70 Fosdick, Successful Christian Living, 76, 78.
71 Fosdick, Secret of Victorious Living, 78-87.
72 Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 1A Box 12 Folder 42.
thinks of the Negro problem. For ages in Africa one race worked out its inveterate peculiarities and for ages another race in Europe and North America worked out its inveterate particularities, and then of a sudden the two races were poured together by the white man’s avarice and cruelty. Prejudice is not the marvel; goodwill is.”

There is certainly some irony in Fosdick’s “Plea for Goodwill.” He pulls no punches in denouncing racially and ethnically based prejudices, and he expects some pushback for naming specific prejudices from people who otherwise “would have been charmed with a discourse in general about brotherliness.” Yet, as it turned out, there was at least one parishioner—and at least two more, if that one is to be believed—who were charmed by the discourse on goodwill. A letter sent anonymously to Fosdick from a Riverside member starts with a brief reflection on the sermon, meant to give Fosdick an observer’s view of his influence. The letter notes a mother and daughter who sat that morning to the author’s left, holding expressions “of thin-lipped intolerance” for the “spare, aging, and distinguished gentleman of Scotland” who sat to the writer’s right. Yet, “At the end of the sermon the daughter was crying openly, and the mother turned and smiled a lovely smile.”

This was undoubtedly the sort of response that Fosdick was aiming for: an instance of personally changed attitudes. In swapping out language of brotherliness for language of goodwill, however, Fosdick remained at the level of addressing individual attitudes without taking on some of the very social systems with which he was engaged outside of his role as preacher-author. Again, the sermon ostensibly aimed for the social by inviting personal self-examination.

73 Anonymous to Harry Emerson Fosdick, May 3, 1934, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2A Box 1 Folder 2.
Fosdick’s work on race—or, perhaps more tellingly, his work that was focused on issues other than race—could also exhibit a stunning lack of self-awareness. For example, his books and sermons are dotted with derogatory remarks about jazz. In *As I See Religion*, for instance, an argument for conceiving of religion as an art ponders why it is “that wide areas of religion are reactionary, that Roman Catholicism has irresistible allurement for minds like Hilaire Belloc and Chesterton, and that religious modernism is often as noisy and thin as jazz.”74 In “Six Ways to Tell Wrong from Right” (1932), which essentially aims to help cultivate the moral aristocracy Fosdick sees as necessary for social change, he asks, “Why is it that some of us do not like cheap jazz? It is because we have known and loved another kind of music.”75 And in “On Being Indifferent to Religion” (1937), which takes up the question of why some people are, Fosdick draws a parallel to taste in music, arguing that, “In a world where great music is, if a man say, It is nothing to me, give me merely jazz, he is passing judgment on himself.”76 There is an unexamined racial coding in these comments that demonstrates Fosdick’s reflexive rejection of and failure to learn about an art form that did not arise from within his own race- and class-coded habitus.77

Fosdick’s obtuseness on race could be even more blatant than his antipathy to jazz. For instance, in a pre-1930 lecture to the National Dry Goods Association, Fosdick recounts a joke about “a Negro minister” who defines the phrase “status quo” to a

74 Fosdick, *As I See Religion*, 133.
75 Fosdick, *Hope of the World*, 133.
77 The concept of “habitus” comes from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who described and elucidated it in numerous sources. Terry Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion: Imposing Faith and Legitimacy* (London: Equinox Publishing, 2007), 154, describes it succinctly as “the fundamental dimension of the individual as a social being that is at one and the same time the ‘matrix of perception’ and the seat and generator of dispositions.”
confused parishioner as, “Status quo—that am Latin for what a dickens of a mess we is in.”  

Similarly, Miller notes a 1938 address Fosdick gave at the Waldorf-Astoria in which he reports receiving in response to a radio sermon “a letter from a colored CCC Camp which says that the service came in over the air, and, if I remember rightly, stopped two fights, three crap games, and all manner of profanity.” He was not above deploying cheap stereotypes in order to garner laughs and build rapport with his audiences. Nor were his remarks limited to African Americans. In “The Cure for Disillusionment” (1933), he drew again on the notion of a moral aristocracy providing hope for social progress, metaphorically utilizing a trope of Native American alcoholism. Calling on an anecdote of “an Indian tribe” going on “a drunken debauch” which designated one member to stay sober, he says that, “Even one Indian can do that. . . . Even one Indian can do that and, as we know, instead of one, there are multitudes of us who could do that with saving effect.”  

Finally, while generally avoiding the worst of the eugenics movement’s rhetoric and ideology, Fosdick nonetheless could draw on the discourse. In an article about the need of the United States to deal productively with its vast power, he takes the opportunity to mention “the peril involved in our crazy unwillingness to use eugenic information to prevent the multiplication of the insane and criminal classes.” It can be no accident that he juxtaposes “those of us who are not feeble-minded” with “the Jukes family and the Kallikak family, generation after generation producing a lamentable crop of defective, insane, and criminal descendants.”

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78 “The Kind of Man I Like to Work With,” Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 1B Box 3 Folder 4.
79 Miller, Harry Emerson Fosdick, 452.
80 Fosdick, Secret of Victorious Living, 26-27.
81 Harry Emerson Fosdick, “Harry Emerson Fosdick’s Dramatic Assessment of America’s Biggest
In what is perhaps an ironic manifestation of the social-individual link he championed, Fosdick thus individually engendered a socially-produced, white, liberal discourse which evidenced a condescension toward and fear of the racial other.

Fosdick’s mirroring of the social gospel’s reflections on race thus may be seen to channel, if in partial and muted form, some of the early racial anxieties, or at least blindesses, of a Josiah Strong. His antiracist work was complicated by his condescension and lack of self-awareness; at the same time, his biases were mitigated by his social and homiletic witness against racism and prejudice. In terms of his writing and preaching, however, it must be noted that his offhand comments, those illustrations that slipped so comfortably by in their service to his larger rhetorical points, served a particular function. He addressed the social while seeking to mobilize the personal. Fosdick’s denigrations of jazz, his jokes about “colored ministers” and “drunken Indians,” his condescending remarks about “idiots” and “morons,” served to draw boundaries around his listenership and readership that solidified them against the unfortunate, reprobate, degenerate other. The moral aristocracy was to be mobilized against prejudice and oppression while being reassured of its difference from racism’s downtrodden victims.

Ecumenism

Dorrien characterizes ecumenism as one of the key manifestations of the postwar social gospel. The antiwar emphasis of the social gospel, he writes, “fueled a sprawling network of denominational peace fellowships and social justice ministries, inspired a burgeoning antiwar movement, provided a basis for the ascending ecumenical movement,

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and influenced virtually every prominent liberal theologian of the time.”

Denominational particularity, with its attendant jealousies and multiplication of efforts, was a barrier to doing the work that needed to be done in order to make the world more reflective of the Kingdom of God. Kevin Schultz extends this to what he calls “Tri-Faith pluralism,” the interfaith work among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews that was implemented in the period after the First World War as “Protestant America” began to disintegrate. He posits that the social gospel movement was a prominent factor in this; the activism and organization of the social gospel in tackling issues arising from immigration and urbanization led to increased contact with “the other” on the part of the social gospel Protestants, which lent itself, if uneasily, to some interfaith work.

Fosdick’s social gospel ecumenism is perhaps more easily seen in the breadth of organizations to which he lent his name and energy, or in the policy of open membership—that is, no requirements that those who wished to join subscribe to a particular creed or be baptized in a particular mode, if at all—that characterized the Riverside Church. However, he addressed ecumenism homiletically, as well. For instance, in “The Hope of the World in its Minorities,” Fosdick takes to task churches that function as “sectarian organizations that carry over from old political quarrels and theological debates denominational divisions that have no pertinency to modern life.” In “What Christians Have Done to Christ,” he bemoans “how often we Christians have claimed Jesus as sponsor of partisanship he never would have sponsored,” arguing that such fracturing undermines the church’s ability to speak forcefully against the destructive

82 Dorrien, Social Ethics in the Making, 108.
84 Fosdick, Hope of the World, 6.
forces of nationalism.\textsuperscript{85} And in “A Plea for Goodwill,” Fosdick broadens his purview, addressing to his Protestant audience a challenge to negate prejudice against the religious other by remembering the best examples of those others. Thus, “we have too many high-minded Jewish friends ever to let that cruel abomination, anti-Semitism, get a foothold in our minds.” Likewise, “We are far from being Roman Catholics but some of the noblest, finest friends and fellow citizens we have are Roman Catholics.” He offers that, “The house of mankind has many rooms and it is only a humane man who grows rich by the freedom of them all.”\textsuperscript{86} If Fosdick’s—and social gospelers’ in general, for that matter—“Tri-faith” sentiments displayed an assumed sense of cultural, theological, and intellectual privilege of place for Protestantism, it is nonetheless true that he articulated and practiced a vision of working across religious boundaries for a vision of the common good.

**Personalism, the “Genius of Christianity”**

Having traced the contours of Fosdick’s 1930s social gospel, arising as it did from his animating philosophical commitment to personalism, it remains now to devote further attention to his personalism itself. There is a sense in which Fosdick probably would have considered the separation of the two to be misleading; if the social and the personal are part and parcel, then it is false to describe the social gospel and personalism as discrete elements. Granting this, it is nonetheless possible to note, as I have done, that Fosdick’s own homiletical approach tended to make even social issues approachable and relatable through appeal to the personal. Further, it may be rightly pointed out that an outgrowth of

\textsuperscript{85} Fosdick, *Successful Christian Living*, 150.
\textsuperscript{86} Fosdick, *Secret of Victorious Living*, 85-86.
Fosdick’s social gospel’s being grounded in personalism is that it is far easier to find in his speaking and writing references to personality that do not explicitly appeal to the social than it is to find social commentary that does not appeal to the personal. Of course, conceiving sermons as “personal counseling on a group scale” indicates that the target audience is constructed as individual listeners or readers even when gathered together congregationally, and Fosdick’s sense that the individual was the building block of the social made his recourse to the social within the personal implicit. However, that status as implicit also made it easier for the social to disappear. This section of the chapter examines Fosdick’s personalism.

Personalism—or the pursuit of personality, which Hedstrom contends was, for Fosdick, “the soul for the modern age”\(^{87}\)—pervades all of Fosdick’s work, regardless of period. It leavened his reflections on his own mental health break and the writing that flowed from that, and it coursed through his production during the Depression era. In “When Life Goes All to Pieces” (1934), he contends that, “All my thinking starts from it and comes back to it. Here it is: the key to the understanding of all life is the value of personality.”\(^{88}\) He goes on to argue that personality is the key to an individual sense of moral obligation, that it is the standard of judgment on social questions, and that it opens the door to eternal life; attention to personality, in other words, encompasses all necessary elements of the Christian faith, namely the individual, the social, and the eternal. But this conviction could have come from virtually any other era of Fosdick’s ministry. As far as Fosdick is concerned, then, the question is less about how the Depression challenged and changed his articulation of personalism. It didn’t to a

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noticeable degree. Rather, the larger inquiry pertains to how that central theo-philosophic ethical principle took on life within the context of Fosdick’s sermons and writings, how it shaped his thought as he framed messages for his expansive audiences embedded within a particular era, how, in short, personalism impacted his utterances in a time of crisis and how it responded to his audiences’ particular needs.

Fosdick’s book, *As I See Religion*, originally appeared as a series of essays which ran in *Harper’s* magazine from 1929 to 1932. The volume may be considered, in part, as a definitive articulation of Fosdick’s view on personalism and the pre-compilation dating of the articles would seem to indicate that the onset of the Great Depression did not seriously impact Fosdick’s philosophical views on the point. Rather, the search for personality, which of course takes place within time, is itself a timeless concern, transcending the specifics of any given epoch. “The genius of Christianity,” argues Fosdick, “lies in reverence for personality.” He echoes the liberal Protestant conviction that religion and the development of personality are inseparable, and that, while there is some validity to all religious experience, it is its particular attention to personality which lifts Christianity above all others. Concern for personality is the sine qua non of true Christianity, the director even of social Christianity, as it drives the very social witness by which social Christianity is characterized. Fosdick summarizes social Christianity’s teachings as having “represented Jesus as a social reformer, a prophet of the Kingdom of God, who foresaw a reign of righteousness and brotherhood on earth and willingly died

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89 Hedstrom, *Rise of Liberal Religion*, 92-100 provides an excellent analysis of *As I See Religion*, positioning the text as illustrative of and effective within the trajectory of liberal Protestant book culture’s enabling of the development of American liberal religion which overflowed the bounds of Protestantism.

for it. That picture of him is undoubtedly true,” he allows, “but his social prophethood was the consequence of something profound in his philosophy.” Engaging, perhaps, in the time-honored tradition of reading contemporary issues into ancient texts, Fosdick insists that the “something profound” was that Jesus “was the champion of personality.” Indeed, this is for Fosdick the very measure of one’s worthiness to claim the Christian name. “Whether one really is a Christian or not depends on whether one accepts or rejects Jesus’ attitude toward personality.”

The starting point for all religion, in other words, is psychological experience. Sociologists Louis Schneider and Sanford M. Dornbusch judged Fosdick’s book to be the first to place “an emphasis on psychology as an aid to man’s attaining something like salvation in this life.” In his assertion of religion as first and foremost psychological, Fosdick voices the quintessential liberal Protestant claim, evincing a strong affinity for William James, that religion originates in and is driven by the individual’s experience and subsequent interpretation. Likewise, Rufus Jones echoes strongly in Fosdick’s claim that, “Religion is deeper than [doctrine, theology, and ecclesiastical practice]. It created these in the first place and it will persist long after their present forms have passed. . . . Religion at its fountainhead is an individual psychological experience.” And again, the real task of religious leaders and practitioners is not to salvage religion from any social hostilities or supposed philosophical threats; rather, echoing the evangelical roots of his liberalism, Fosdick contends that, “Our real task is to achieve a religion which saves

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91 Ibid., 42-43.
people; and such religion must be primarily an individual, psychological experience.”

Or, as one of his secretaries summarized one of Fosdick’s letters to a reader, he “explained that the road out to God is not simply the material; he moves out through the spiritual—intelligence, purposefulness, and goodwill, which are always personal experiences—and feels confident that this is the true road to God.” The key concern that flows from these twin convictions—that the starting point of religion is found in psychology and that the particular genius of Christianity lies in honing this psychological starting point in pursuit of personality’s flourishing—might thus be construed in the question, What type of personality does Fosdick’s religion seek to develop? Or, considered from a different angle, the question might become, How were these concerns particularly manifested in Fosdick’s preaching and writing?

The supreme personality, of course, in which all of the highest elements of humanity are distilled and which serves as the utmost model for all human personality, is that of Jesus. As Fosdick asserted at Riverside and over the air in his 1936 Christmas sermon, “We never have faced Christianity until we have faced Christ. Have we faced him? He is Christianity, truth through personality.” Yet, that personality had to be discerned and recreated through ongoing acts of reconstruction and interpretation, and in the early stages of Fosdick’s ministry especially, it was a particularly gendered personality. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Fosdick was part and parcel of a large swath of white, Protestant culture that sought to draw more men into active

94 Ibid., 9.
95 Summary of letter to Edward Prindle, June 4, 1931, Schedule of Destroyed Letters, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2A Box 1 Folder 1.
96 “Truth Through Personality,” Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archive at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 1A Box 14 Folder 22.
participation in church and religious pursuits by casting religion, and Jesus, as the epitome of manliness. Curtis vastly overstates the case when she says that Fosdick “emerged as the principal proponent of ‘muscular Christianity,’ an emphasis that saved Protestantism from returning to the stern orthodoxy of the nineteenth century at the same time that it rescued manliness from the clutches of a ‘feminized’ culture.”  

Writing on the Men and Religion Forward Movement of 1911-1912, Gail Bederman notes that its organizers downplayed denominational differences in service to the goal of getting men back to church and were thereby “able to attract the active support of an unusually wide spectrum of prominent Protestant churchmen,” drawing diverse personages such as John D. Rockefeller, J. Pierpont Morgan, Washington Gladden, Walter Rauschenbusch, and William Jennings Bryan into common cause. If it is too much to call Fosdick the lead voice of such a movement, however, Curtis is right to note that Fosdick’s *The Manhood of the Master* “contributed to the effort to rescue Jesus from limp-wristed androgyny . . . [and] helped legitimize the domestic values of service, sacrifice, and nurture for Christian men.”  

By the time of the Depression, the specific gendering of this emphasis on finding Christ-like personality was somewhat less in evidence. In part, this is because, as Bederman asserts, the movement to draw men to church had largely succeeded by the 1920s. Yet, a clearly discernible residue of that earlier discourse remained in Fosdick’s message. One characteristic that played out in his personalism was an emphasis on

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97 Curtis, *Consuming Faith*, 207.
100 Bederman, “The Women Have Had Charge of the Church Work Long Enough.”
activity; the search for personality, along with the creation of social conditions that would allow the flourishing of all personalities, could not be relegated to a realm of passivity. They required action. Thus, in “Is Our Christianity Appealing to Our Softness of Our Strength” (1933), he counsels, “beware of the kind of Christianity that appeals to, brings out, and accentuates your softness.” While he asserts that “the historic Jesus . . . did comfort people . . . poured out friendliness without stint . . . [and] could be as tender as a mother,” he also points to Jesus’ crucifixion and the persecutions suffered by early Christians to show that Jesus “did not bring out men’s softness, only their strength.”

Tellingly, while Fosdick would sometimes draw on stories of exceptional women such as Florence Nightingale or Helen Keller for his illustrations, every example of moral courage in this particular sermon is male.

If Fosdick’s Depression-era personalism retained an emphasis on strength, activity, and agency, *As I See Religion* makes clear that they were to be strength, activity and agency that were grounded in and developed through interiority. On the question of whether religious people were fooling themselves with comforting platitudes and the denial of reality, Fosdick responded that, “All great religion . . . starts with self-renunciation.” The valuation of personality led Jesus to the cross: “To give his life for the liberation and elevation of personality, asking as little as possible for himself and expecting as much as possible of himself—to Jesus that was the upshot of believing that personality was sacred.” Religion is given to types of escape, but its best manifestations “re-establish us and return us to the world not less but better fitted to grapple with reality and throw it.” And again, vital, personality-driven Christianity “means not escape from

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but transformation of the actual world”—which, as it happens, comprises a good summation of social gospel personalism’s aim of effecting social structural change through attention to the individuals who are part and parcel of those social structures.\textsuperscript{102}

It must be noted that, while Fosdick frequently imbricated personality-championing Christianity and the principle of self-renunciation or sacrifice (another concept which highlights the influence on him of Jones’s \textit{Social Law in the Spiritual World}), he did not view the latter as uniformly applicable. For instance, in “On Making Christianity Too Easy” (1934), he makes self-renunciation the central principle of Jesus’ actions and proceeds to argue that, “Without that principle of action no great thing ever has been done on earth—vicarious sacrifice, where some one, who did not need to, voluntarily assumed a heavy task.”\textsuperscript{103} Examples included Florence Nightingale, prison reformer John Howard, and mothers, along with Jesus. But he also recognizes some contextual differentiation in the application of the principle, consciously exempting from his appeal for benevolence giving those in the congregation who had already been generous even in the face of Depression-based losses. Yet, the difference was only one of degree, for Fosdick’s personalism led him to articulate as a universal necessity individuals’ search for interior wholeness as precondition for sacrificial love. In “Discovering What We Can Do With Ourselves” (1935), he works out the motif of working on oneself—finding a fundamental unity and agreement between “I and Me,” the subjective and objective selves—as a means of benefitting the world. In this sermon, he denies that “what the preacher claims is true but true only of the creative geniuses,” arguing rather that, “what even the least of us does with himself makes a difference to the

\textsuperscript{102} Fosdick, \textit{As I See Religion}, 122-127.
\textsuperscript{103} Fosdick, \textit{Secret of Victorious Living}, 32.
world” on two fronts, namely that “it makes a difference to you . . . how you live with yourself” and that “it makes a difference to the world how you live with yourself—at any rate to some people in the world.”

There is some irony in Fosdick’s appeal to “the least of us,” however, for his homiletical approach tended to lead him, as a rhetorical device, to elevate extraordinary individuals as his paradigmatic illustrations. That’s not to say that he relied on them exclusively. He told many stories of unnamed individuals whose circumstances fit his homiletic needs. Yet the preacher’s quest is for examples that will be memorable, and Fosdick most often found those in public life, sometimes in literature, and especially in the pages of biography. Thus, for example, the two sermons which open The Secret of Victorious Living—“The Secret of Victorious Living” and “The High Uses of Trouble”—make appeal to Jesus, Paul, Epictetus, Beethoven, President Roosevelt, Helen Keller, William James, Marie Antoinette, Captain Scott, Charles Dickens, R.L. Stevenson, and Cardinal Mercier. In searching for aspirational vignettes which would encourage his audiences to search for their own vital, and vitally vicariously sacrificial, personalities, Fosdick also ran the risk of reifying and reinforcing the very objection he sought to overcome, namely, that “the least of us” don’t really have all that much to offer.

One further facet of Fosdick’s personalist philosophy as it worked itself out in his preaching is his emphasis on beauty. In this regard, the physical structure of Riverside itself functioned as a concretization of Fosdick’s central concern. He states as much himself in “On Making Christianity Too Easy,” asserting that, “this church itself bears witness to the fact that we regard beauty as a gateway to the experience of God and

rejoice in worship stimulated and enriched by symmetry, harmony, and color.” In short, the development of personality could be enhanced through attention to aesthetics. This was true even of the most important personality: Jesus “himself was such a lover of beauty” that he “told perfect parables,” appreciated “the lilies of the field,” and “spent his last night in a garden to gather strength for his ordeal.”

In this, Fosdick was again a faithful representative of liberal Protestant concerns, which, in elevating experience as authoritative, had decentered the role of scripture and opened the possibility of the devotional use of images. As David Morgan has argued, “Fundamental to the new devotional conception of images among Protestants was the notion that images shaped behavior by shaping feeling and that fine art refined individual and national character.”

Fosdick addresses this relationship in his sermon, “Religious Living is an Art,” enjoining, “Make spiritual life beautiful—that is religion!” While holding to liberal Protestantism’s acceptance and utilization of new scientific knowledges, he contends here that religion and science speak different languages, and that art is the more appropriate lens through which to conceive of religion. “When you move over from science to art you move over from a realm of general and abstract propositions to a realm of personality.” Attention to beauty and art in both the settings and the practice of religion, in other words, could help to develop the religious actor’s personality itself into a work of art.

Fosdick works similar territory in *As I See Religion*, in a chapter entitled “But Religion is an Art,” in which he argues that religion cannot be reduced to science, that a

107 Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 1A Box 12 Folder 12.
lack of attention to beauty is harmful to religion, and that modernist Protestants had not paid enough attention to that. As quoted above, he saw this as a reason that “wide areas of religion are reactionary, that Roman Catholicism has irresistible allurement for minds like Hilaire Belloc and Chesterton, and that religious modernism is often as noisy and thin as jazz.” At the same time, he argues here that beauty is no substitute for ethical engagement, contending that, “Our present civilization is too inhuman and unhappy to be much helped by a religion which provides in beauty a mere escape from moral problems.” He had also argued for the limits of beauty as an end in itself in “On Making Christianity Too Easy”; while imagining that Jesus would appreciate the characterization as artist, he also asserts that, “to be a Christian is more than that . . . [for] a merely esthetic Christianity is of no more use than rose-water.” Yet, the point remains that Fosdick conceived of Christian attention to beauty as a key means of engaging the sharpest minds, and assisting in the flourishing of personality, which he saw as the foundation of good religion.

Of course, Fosdick’s sense of what was beautiful was rather restricted, which hints at a larger constraint on his utilization of personalism as the focal lens for social gospel concerns. He ends his meditation on religion and art, and religion as art, with the confidence—oddly buoyant for a piece published after the Depression had already wrapped the nation in its grip—that, “Unless some new débâcle of human folly, like the Great War, wrecks our chance, we are moving out into a renaissance of beauty all along our civilization’s line,” which, he hoped, “may succeed in making beauty for multitudes

109 Ibid., 157.
an allurement to goodness and a pathway to God.”

His promotion of “symmetry, harmony, and color” as elements of personality-enriching worship points to his distinctly bounded notion of the beauty that fosters and promotes personality; it echoes what Morgan has noted as a generalized liberal Protestant conviction in the early twentieth century upholding European standards of artistic beauty as the epitome of aesthetics in contrast to “the lack of American refinement.” Thus was one of Fosdick’s favorite exemplars of beauty the Italian conductor Arturo Toscanini, and one of his favorite targets jazz music. The personality which Fosdick championed, which drove his message and from which he offered his social gospel advocacy, while putatively neutral and generic, bore within it reflections of particularity in class, race, gender, and the residue of Victorian respectability.

“Handicapped Lives” and A Social Gospel of Wellness

One trope that Fosdick returned to a number of times in his preaching and his writing was that of overcoming—overcoming external obstacles through the vitality discovered via religious interiority and overcoming internal, personal obstacles. “The Secret of Victorious Living,” for instance, provides a number of examples of famous personages who overcame personal and social obstacles, attending to their own lives as a precondition for making social contributions. One way in which overcoming was phrased in Fosdick’s work was through the contrast of wholeness and fragmentation: in “When Life All Goes to Pieces,” which underlines the centrality of personality to Fosdick’s thinking, he contends that, “This world keeps tearing us apart so that we deeply need

111 Fosdick, As I See Religion, 159.
112 Morgan, Protestants and Pictures, 316.
those forces which pull life together again. . . [A]t every point the modern world tempts us or drives us to fragmentariness, scatters us so that our centrality is lost.“¹¹³ As the Depression encroached, though, one image that seems to have gained particular favor and currency for Fosdick was that of handicap.¹¹⁴ “Discovering What We Can Do With Ourselves” notes that one frequent obstacle in harmonizing the I and Me relationship is the realization that “we face handicap. . . . We are handicapped by our limitations within and by circumstances without.”¹¹⁵

Nowhere, however, is the language of handicap more explicit than in Fosdick’s sermon, “Handicapped Lives.”¹¹⁶ It is, I contend, a prime example of what Fosdick’s personalism-driven social gospel looked like in the Depression era, and thus makes a good case study of the content of preaching. Fosdick got a lot of mileage from this sermon, and the sermon itself and its key ideas showed up in numerous places. The original sermon is missing from the archives, but a chronology of radio sermons indicates that it was preached on National Vespers on February 16, 1930, so Fosdick probably preached it at Riverside in late January or early February. The very day that it was broadcast nationally, G.D. Kettelkamp of the City of St. Louis Department of Public Welfare, Hospital Division, wrote to compliment Fosdick on the message, stating that it had special appeal to him “because of the work in which I am engaged and also handicaps which I have experienced personally,” and asking for a copy so that he could

¹¹³ Fosdick, Power to See It Through, 32.
¹¹⁴ It is possible, of course, that the language of handicap was present in Fosdick’s work prior to the Depression; because I did not study that material as carefully, my argument is not that it was necessarily an entirely new image. Rather, I am suggesting that it took on a particular frequency and importance in this era and that it seems to have struck Fosdick as a particularly cogent means of addressing the world in which he lived at that time.
¹¹⁵ Fosdick, Successful Christian Living, 29.
¹¹⁶ Fosdick, Power to See It Through, 42-51.
The sermon was presented in its entirety in 1931 in *Thumbs Up!* a periodical for people with disabilities. Portions of the sermon also show up in a 1931 article in *Physical Culture* on “Building a Personality,” which was itself condensed several years later in *Reader’s Digest,* and Fosdick chose the sermon for inclusion in his 1935 volume, *The Power to See It Through.* Finally, it is worthwhile to note that Fosdick was still deploying the imagery nearly two decades later, as he did in an article in which he used as an illustration a veteran who had lost three limbs and both eyes, but who went on to earn a Ph.D.: “Not every handicapped person can win thru to so conspicuous a result, but the spirit that stays undefeated in spite of everything is part of the solution.”

In the sermon, Fosdick cuts through the morass of religion’s peripheral concerns to address its core, namely personal psychological experience and the individual sense of limitations:

Often in churches we hear theological, ecclesiastical, and liturgical matters discussed as though the central problem of man’s spiritual life somehow lay there. How far that is from the truth! How many people here really have the crux of their spiritual problems in details of theology or theories of church and liturgy? But one may be sure of one place where many of us do have the central problem of our spiritual life, the watershed from which the streams of life may flow to far dissevered destinies, and that is in the region of our handicaps.

The handicaps he intends are varied—physical, mental, emotional—but the key is that nearly everybody has got at least one: “Among the few things that are true of all of us is

117 G.D. Kettelkamp to Harry Emerson Fosdick, February 16, 1930, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2A Box 6 Folder 1.
120 Harry Emerson Fosdick, “Harry Emerson Fosdick asks—are we part of the problem or of the answer?” *Journal of the National Education Association* (December 1947): 622.
the fact that each one of us has a handicap.” Indeed, many people with wondrous accomplishments have struggled through handicaps; Fosdick mentions Pasteur’s stroke-induced paralysis from the age of forty-six, explorer Henry M. Stanley’s childhood in an almshouse, Beethoven’s deafness and Milton’s blindness. What handicaps call for is “the grace to take, not a negative, but a positive attitude toward them.” Handicaps can be taken as challenges, sometimes even fascinating ones. “It is a good cook who knows how, after the dinner has been accidentally burned, to make a fine meal out of the leftovers, and if she is a good cook she will feel challenged by the necessity of trying.”

The crux is to recognize what can be helped in a situation and what cannot, and to proceed thereon, taking on only one’s responsibilities rather than comparing oneself unfavorably with others who do not have the same limitations. “Do not condescend to your limitations. They are your opportunities. Remember, God will never judge us in masses. Each one of us will have a private examination. What did we do with our special situation? That is all.”

If this all seems to focus merely on the individual, however, Fosdick would insist once again that the individual personality must be shored up in order to make a contribution to the world. Indeed, so far from being transcended—for the reality is that many must be lived with and adapted to—handicaps may serve as the ground from which an individual may wield a profound spiritual influence. Turning to a favorite illustration subject, Fosdick calls upon the example of Helen Keller, who “does something to us which no shining Apollo can do.” By overcoming her physical disabilities, she became a powerful source of encouragement and inspiration to others, far more so than anyone who lives up to achievements that would be expected of them due to their innate abilities. As
Fosdick states it in “Discovering What We Can Do With Ourselves,” in which he also draws upon Keller as an example, “While creative geniuses have nobly served the world on a great scale and so have served us within it, when one thinks of the most secret, inward, redemptive, spiritual help one ever has received, how much of it has come from handicapped people!” Indeed, handicaps may even be salvific; Fosdick ends “Handicapped Lives” with a paragraph on the crucifixion. “To die at thirty-three on a cross is a handicap.” And yet it was that cross that made the Christ. “That handicap was his most shining instrument.”

“Handicapped Lives,” then, demonstrates Fosdick’s social gospel: the preacher as group-level personal counselor, striving to empower his listeners and readers to create a social impact by attending to their personal spiritual needs. At the interpersonal level, the sermon is perhaps a bit distasteful to contemporary sensibilities, insofar as Fosdick uses people with disabilities as objects lessons, illustrations drawn up for the benefit of those without disabilities, or those whose disabilities are less in evidence. From the perspective of today’s disability studies, the trope of the valorous handicapped life is highly problematic, arrogating as it does other people’s experiences and all but forcing people with disabilities into the role of psychically propping up people without disabilities. However, within the context of its era, the sermon offers something more than condescending pity. It goes beyond the end of individual encouragement and inspiration, because Fosdick’s personalist philosophy saw the individual and social as profoundly imbricated. The individual had social ramifications and vice versa; both were important. Fosdick points to William Wilberforce’s small stature and lifelong poor health—yet,

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121 Fosdick, Successful Christian Living, 29.
through courage and overcoming his handicaps, he used the personal to impact the social, as “more than any other Englishman he stopped the British slave trade.” Or, to once again quote the handicap-referencing “Discovering What We Can Do With Ourselves,” Fosdick argues against bifurcating the “inward and psychological” nature of the “I-and-Me relationship” from the “external and sociological” nature of “the problems of the world.” The two must be seen “not apart but together. I never can make the best of Me by thinking only about Me. We must change the social structure, change it deeply, for, as it is, it impinges on individuals with such cruel inequity that I has no fair chance to make the most of Me.”122 Fosdick’s trope of the handicapped life is thus also a metaphor for the modern world, broken in spirit by debilitating conditions of cynicism and hopelessness. It functioned as a social gospel metaphor for the America of the 1930s.

Judging from the proliferation of this trope, it found resonance with Fosdick’s audiences. If readers like G.D. Kettelkamp saw fit to request copies for further distribution, Fosdick himself likewise found the sermon helpful as a pastoral response to some of his letter writers. The archives offer summaries of two such letters which one of Fosdick’s secretaries compiled. On June 4, 1931, Fosdick offered what may have been the most compassionate response possible by a successful Protestant minister of the era to a twenty-nine year old man from Oak Park, IL, who was struggling with his homosexuality and wondered whether there was any way out, or, if not, how he might live a happy life under the circumstances. Fosdick wasn’t sure, and was hesitant to offer much counsel at such a great distance; he suggested seeing a psychiatrist to discuss the possibilities, but offered that, in the absence of a “permanent cure,” the man would need

122 Ibid., 31-32.
to deal with it as a handicap. Fosdick sent him a copy of the sermon. He did the same in 1934 for a Swannanoa, NC woman who was widowed, had been abandoned by the rest of her family, and was deaf and untrained in business. Fosdick offered a copy of the sermon along with his sympathies.123

In focusing the social gospel through the lens of personalism, Fosdick struck simultaneous notes of empathy and inspiration, aiming for the repair of the social body through attention to the individual body. As with Pasteur, Beethoven, and Wilberforce, personal disabilities could become the stepping off point to a far wider impact, and the spiritual wisdom, vitality, and influence that flowed from weathering one’s handicaps could function as a restorative for a sick world. But there is also an unresolved tension between the personal and the social in Fosdick’s homiletical output, an elision of the latter within the former, that this sermon illustrates particularly via its recourse to Helen Keller. Fosdick was clearly thoroughly inspired by Keller, and in 1936 even had the opportunity to deliver the eulogy for her teacher, Anne Sullivan. After he used Keller as an illustration in a 1932 address, she wrote him a very gracious letter expressing her gratitude. “You are impressing on the young generation the difference between true religion and lip-service, you are showing them how mind and heart must work together in the solution of their personal and public problems,” she wrote. “If you can convince them that the Teaching of Jesus can be lived in a human world, then, and only then shall we die out of our difficulties, material and spiritual, and achieve a civilization that will bring more abundant life to all.”124 Keller likewise recognized the interpenetration of the

123 Both items in the Schedule of Destroyed Letters, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2A Box 1 Folder 1.
124 Helen Keller to Harry Emerson Fosdick, October 4, 1932, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The
personal and social, and she acted on this recognition through, for instance, becoming a Socialist, helping to found the American Civil Liberties Union (in which Fosdick was likewise active), and advocating on behalf of the blind. Fosdick, too, was politically active in pursuit of his social gospel aims, lending his name, his money, and his energy to numerous causes. The irony of “Handicapped Lives,” however, is that even as it seeks to address the social via the personal, it demonstrates the limits of a sermon as a catalyst for action. With his repeated, but always decontextualized, appeals to Helen Keller, Fosdick aimed for a personalism broad enough to inspire every listener and reader. In so doing, however, the very personalism that was supposed to help with social engagement became in some sense diluted; social engagement requires particularity, whereas the breadth of this personal appeal was abstract. The prioritization of personalism and interiority allowed the social to hide in plain sight.

An Obstructed View: Further Thoughts on Social Gospel Personalism and Class

Another 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. That is, as intimated earlier in the chapter, 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. Thus, while Fosdick himself envisioned the arising of a moral aristocracy, cutting across categories of race and class, which would issue forth in an individually-rooted transformation of society, his conceptualization of social gospel personalism bore the distinct imprint of class privilege.
This may be seen quite clearly by examining the material conditions of Fosdick’s life, those within which he 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 pastorate in Montclair, New Jersey, 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 that education was a core familial value with which he was inculcated. He completed his undergraduate studies at Colgate University before attending Union and completing some 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 institutions on Morningside Heights—that he would see the erection of The Riverside Church, in the city that he would develop relationships with editors and publishers who would disseminate his thought globally, and in the city 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.\footnote{Miller, \textit{Harry Emerson Fosdick}, 312-317 summarizes the material and monetary circumstances that attended Fosdick’s professional life.} His ministerial salary could actually have been higher than it was: the annual salary with which he ended his time in Montclair was $5,000, which was the same
salary that 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 than that. “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.”  

His salary was raised to $7,000 in 1928, and then to $10,000 in 1930, but this increase was to compensate for a reduction in his salary when he decreased his teaching load at Union. In 1934, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. established a fund which, in part, helped to fund a further increase in Fosdick’s salary when he further decreased 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 the paychecks that he received from the church. Much of his income was derived from sources other than his church salary, with his annual income generally exceeding $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 after reducing his teaching load to

126 Cited in Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick*, 312.
127 Harry Emerson Fosdick to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., February 16, 1934, Rockefeller Archive Center, Rockefeller Family Collection, Record Group 3, Series N, Box 72, Folder 558.
a minimal level, 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. The family saw numerous places in the United States, and also enjoyed travel to Europe. But Fosdick’s favorite destination was Maine. He and his extended family had purchased Mouse Island in Boothbay Harbor, Maine in 1919, and completed cabins there in 1924. Fosdick and family spent most summers there; Fosdick stayed in New York until early August, so that he could continue preaching at Riverside while Columbia held its summer sessions. Afterward, the family would spend several weeks at their Mouse Island quarters. Fosdick’s description of the dwellings is perhaps 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, as Sean McCloud has noted, in part reflects the relative availability of various types of social and cultural resources, Fosdick’s summer residence also

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128 Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick*, 315-316.
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,” Maine, his summer residence, to discuss matters of planning the new church building.\footnote{129 Harry Emerson Fosdick to James C. Colgate, August 4, 1925, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archive at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2B Box 4 Folder 7.} Similarly, during a 1933 exchange of letters regarding plans for Fosdick to end his teaching load at Union, Rockefeller expressed the desire to carry on a conversation during a long, leisurely walk in the woods of Mouse Island, as they had done many times before.\footnote{130 John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to Harry Emerson Fosdick, July 28, 1933, Rockefeller Archive Center, Rockefeller Family Collection, Record Group 3, Series N, Box 72, Folder 558.}

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.”\footnote{131 John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to Harry Emerson Fosdick, February 20, 1934, Rockefeller Archive Center, Rockefeller Family Collection, Record Group 3, Series N, Box 72, Folder 558.} 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 person gifts. Some of these Fosdick politely declined, but Miller lists several 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 or influencing the content of Fosdick’s preaching and public pronouncements and activities, 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 wrote taking issue with a sermon Fosdick had preached that was critical of industry. He quoted another parishioner as contending, “I don’t think Dr. Fosdick was fair to industry in what he said,” going on to explain 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 conditions for their employees. Fosdick was firm, for his part, in defending his statements, contending even 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, he 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, also 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 relationship and material conditions on Morningside Heights, is the activism of Claude 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 turn of the twentieth century childhood in western Tennessee, part of a hardworking but poor farming family that belonged to the conservative Cumberland Presbyterian church. An inquisitive child, he asked questions that were difficult to answer, leading 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.

After a falling out with his denomination, Williams accepted a preaching assignment within the Presbyterian Church (USA) 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 correspondence courses offered by the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, which largely adhered to an antiliberal consensus. 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 that were geared toward non-academics.¹³⁴ The first book that Williams received from the Book Club was Fosdick’s 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 the scripture as the record of Christian ideals and their development and therefore a practical guide to moral behavior and action for modern people.¹³⁵ The book stirred a new vision in Williams, who stayed awake late at night studying it with his wife, Joyce. With an awakened desire for a broader circle of religious scholars with whom he could discuss theology, Williams subsequently 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’s awakening to a socially engaged

¹³⁴ On the Religious Book Club, see Hedstrom, Rise of Liberal Religion, 52-79.
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.136

Three years later, Williams found himself in New York City. He had continued the politically and theologically leftward journey that eventuated in the loss of his pastoral position. He was in the city at the invitation of James Dombrowski, a Methodist preacher and the manager of the Highlander Folk School, a center for leadership training in nonviolent, social justice activism, 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 The 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.

Again, Fosdick evidenced awareness of his own class position, and that of The 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.” 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 factors of geography, materiality, and social networks. The very factors which allowed Fosdick’s voice and 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, for instance—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’s 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.

**Conclusion**

On April 18, 1942, Isabel Taylor of Newport, RI wrote to Fosdick. In her letter, she recounts having been in New York City one Sunday morning several years prior during a particularly troubled and perplexed time of her life. Walking along Riverside

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137 Ibid., 60. The sermon title as recorded by Williams does not match any titles contained in the Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary. It is thus unclear precisely which sermon is referenced. Nonetheless, it is Williams’s critical perspective, not an accurate sermon title, which forms the germane observation here.

138 Fosdick, *Living of These Days*, 199.
Drive, she noticed a long line of people waiting to get into the church, so she decided to follow them. That morning, she heard Fosdick preach on a text that was familiar to her but that she hadn’t considered in that light, and she found that “my way grew plain to me.” From that point on, she became a regular listener to Fosdick’s National Vespers radio broadcasts. “And just a week ago,” she writes,

I came upon your book – *The Secret of Victorious Living*. I had come to another difficult place – not dark and stormy like that other – but so steep – and somehow my spirit had failed me. Seeing your name – brought back in an instant the winter morning in New York – and the power that came to me. So I took the book – and infinitely it has refreshed me. I go on again – and once more there is the joy of wings. Joy seems a strange word in these times. But I know now there is a joy no man can take from you.139

As had so many before and after her, Taylor had found something in Fosdick’s message that seemed directed especially to her, and had taken it so deeply to heart that she was moved to sit down and write out a few words of gratitude. The Fosdick archives at Union Theological Seminary are filled with this sort of letter—from parishioners at Riverside, from former students who had reconnected with Fosdick through reading him or listening to him on the radio, from strangers who found in his messages something deeply personal, inspiring, encouraging, bracing. They wrote to express their thanks, they wrote with theological questions, and, as if to validate Fosdick’s sense that his preaching was the performance of personal counseling on a group scale, they wrote for advice about handle their personal struggles. In addition to the letters that are preserved in their original form, countless more were summarized by one of Fosdick’s secretaries and included in a thick file called the Schedule of Destroyed Letters.

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139 Isabel Taylor to Harry Emerson Fosdick, April 18, 1942, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archive at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2B Box 3 Folder 10. Underlining and idiosyncratic punctuation in original.
Isabel Taylor’s letter was thus not atypical, but is particularly suggestive in its timing and in its reference point as to the impact of Fosdick’s message. She wrote in 1942, with the nation having weathered the Great Depression and the world once again embroiled in global warfare. Yet, not a bit of this large-scale tableau is evident in her letter. It could have been plucked from any era of Fosdick’s ministry. While she does not name the problems that she faced on the two occasions referenced in the letter, she does indicate that the resolutions—a sense of assurance regarding the way ahead, and an overwhelming experience of unassailable joy—were existential. This, then, is at least one way of observing the impact of Fosdick’s personalism-infused social gospel. The social circumstances in which human personalities are embedded are ever present, but ever changing in their particularity. The need of personality to find meaning and validation, in contrast, is constant. Fosdick’s personalism shone through clearly and powerfully—but even when it animated and articulated the social with particular vigor, the individual nature of Fosdick’s personalism could allow the social to disappear.
CHAPTER 3

MEDIATED FOSDICK: A PREACHER AND HIS AUDIENCE(S)

These new stunts that the radio makes possible are still to me marvellous [sic] beyond words. One of the pleasant reactions is to receive letters like yours from those whom I have known as students here at the seminary.

Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick to Rev. Norman Kunkel, Feb. 9, 1924

When you preach a sermon there are always some people who speak to you while their hearts are still moved. They may be helped by the sermon months or years afterwards, but there is not the chance to let you know. Most people will speak immediately or not at all.

When you write a book however there are thousands of people who are helped, and not a fraction of them ever express their appreciation for that help. I haven’t. . . . And yet but for you I might not be in Winnipeg. I might not even be in the ministry at all.

I left home early. I went to college late. The struggle with scepticism I had before getting to University not after. And you were the one who spoke to me. Breaking away from old conceptions I found your books giving me something new.

Rev. Ernest Marshall Howse to Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick, August 4, 1938

Introduction

The notes of excitement glimmering in Fosdick’s response to Rev. Norman Kunkel mirror those of his former student. Kunkel had written five days prior to express his own delight at hearing his erstwhile homiletics professor over the air: “The privilege of hearing your voice via radio last Sunday night was one of the biggest treats I’ve had for many a day. Our service here was over at 8.30 and we hustled right over to the house to ‘listen in’ on a borrowed set and were no more than comfortably seated until you began.”

Kunkel was the pastor of The Blue Grass Presbyterian Church and Community Center in Blue Grass, Iowa, and the still-new communications medium of the radio had

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1 Harry Emerson Fosdick to Norman Kunkel, February 9, 1924, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2A Box 6 Folder 4. Ernest Marshall Howse to Harry Emerson Fosdick, August 4, 1938, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2A Box 5 Folder 9.

2 Fosdick to Kunkel, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2A Box 6 Folder 4.
served, if even momentarily, to place him once again under the tutelage of his former instructor, reinforcing an assessment he had formed as a divinity student and had carried with him since: “Hearing you preach and sitting in your classes has made a fellow see how much worth while preaching really can be.”

This brief exchange between Fosdick and Kunkel illustrates a number of factors about the intersections between religion and radio that I will explore within this chapter. It took place prior to the advent of broadcast networks, at a moment when the new technology was still developing and insinuating itself within the fabric of American culture; even so, with foreknowledge of an upcoming broadcast that allowed for the borrowing of a set, Kunkel and his family were able to arrange their Sunday evening in such a way as to invite Fosdick’s voice into their home. The radio served a trans-spatial function, bridging the distance between New York City and Blue Grass, IA virtually instantaneously. For Kunkel, the medium also served a trans-temporal function, as the same airwaves that carried Fosdick’s voice to him simultaneously carried the contextual associations of his past experiences, as well.³ The broadcast brought not only the immediate event of Fosdick’s sermon, it also conjured a history within the present moment, allowing Kunkel, in a manner, to transcend the spatial and temporal boundedness of his living room. Indeed, it is the porous nature of this seemingly discrete event of listening to a radio broadcast—the admixture and interpenetration of past and

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³ I am indebted for this conceptualization to Thomas Tweed’s work on diasporic religion. Tweed argues, for instance, “that through transtemporal and translocative [what I have termed trans-spatial] symbols at the shrine [of Our Lady of Charity in Miami] the diaspora imaginatively constructs its collective identity and transports itself to the Cuba of memory and desire.” Thomas Tweed, Our Lady of Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 10. While it would be obviously imprecise to consider Fosdick and Kunkel’s relationship to be “diasporic,” it nonetheless remains true that the radio imaginatively reconnected them across time and space.
present, here and there, material and immaterial, production and consumption—that makes Fosdick’s radio broadcasts such an interesting artifact of study and so potentially fruitful as a means of understanding how liberal Protestantism and the social gospel tradition engaged the Depression.

Yet, radio was not the only means through which Fosdick’s thought was mediated. Indeed, had he not already been established as a successful preacher and author, radio stations would hardly have been so keen on bringing Fosdick’s voice to the airwaves. By the time of his first radio appearance, in 1924, he already had nine published books to his name, starting with 1908’s *The Second Mile*, a fifty-two page extended reflection on a single biblical verse, reworked from a summer conference sermon. He was also in the national spotlight of Protestantism’s modernist-fundamentalist controversies, having become a flashpoint with the preaching (and John D. Rockefeller, Jr.-sponsored distribution) of his May 24, 1922 sermon “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” Additionally, he was a familiar presence in popular journals and periodicals such as *Christian Century*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Ladies’ Home Journal*. Thus, an exploration of the dissemination of Fosdick’s thought, the intersections of Fosdick and his audiences, necessitates an examination of his print mediation as well as that of his presence on the air.

Fosdick’s message in the postwar years was produced within a context of growing mass media and flourishing consumer culture, which held implications both for its dissemination and its reception that I seek to elucidate in this chapter. I utilize Fosdick’s National Vespers program, his print output, and the body of audience response to both as

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a means of examining liberal Protestantism’s embrace of mass media as a means of wielding cultural influence and the ways in which the media and their reception impacted the social gospel’s incarnation. The chapter begins with an account of the development of radio broadcasting, paying particular attention to the place of religious programming. This will afford a view of liberal Protestantism’s role, assigned and assumed, within the burgeoning radio field. From this broader scope, the chapter turns to the specific place of Fosdick within religious broadcasting during the interwar years. Following a briefer account of print and Protestantism, I turn to audience analysis, attempting to engage the experiences of Fosdick’s audiences and the meanings that they attributed to and found within and through those experiences. It is in this audience analysis that the dynamics of Fosdick’s personalist social gospel come into particular relief; that is, mediating Fosdick’s message seems to have especially heightened the sense of his address to personal concerns.

One final note about periodization is in order here. While the focus of this dissertation is on the Great Depression, radio as a medium grew into its own during the prior decade, and Protestantism’s engagement with print as a mass medium began far earlier still. Thus, my focus needs to extend beyond the parameters set by the global economic collapse, for that crisis overlaid cultural shifts that were already well underway. As Rita Barnard notes, drawing on Richard Wightman Fox, “it was in the twenties and thirties that the characteristic institutions and habits of consumer culture—the motion picture, the radio, the automobile, the weekly photo-newsmagazine, installment buying, the five-day work week, suburban living, and . . . the self-service supermarket—assumed
the central position they still occupy in American life.”⁵ A sense of this altered cultural
landscape is crucial to understanding how Fosdick’s personalism-based social gospel
took shape in a changing context that included, but was not limited to, economic despair.

A Medium Grows Large—And Contested

“The media are not delivery devices,” argues David Morgan, “but the generation
of experiences, forms of shared consciousness, communion, or community that allow
people to assemble meanings that articulate and extend their relations to one another.”⁶
Morgan’s claim illustrates what is termed the cultural turn in the field of media studies,
which looks to James Carey’s 1975 article, “A Cultural Approach to Communication” as
its clarifying moment.⁷ In that article, Carey drew a distinction between two
conceptualizations of communication, which he designated as “transmission” and
“ritual.” The former is static, linear, and hierarchic, involving the passing on of discrete
bits of information. The latter suggests participation on both sides, with both senders and
receivers active and utilizing agency in the sending, receiving, and reassembling of
messages. Building on this work, Morgan and his coauthors are less interested in “media”
as the mass sending of messages by centralized, institutional forces than they are in
“mediation,” the ongoing process by which audiences receive and utilize messages
through accepting, rejecting, shaping, and reshaping them. They are, in other words,
interested in the activities by which people assemble meaningful cultural worlds.

This is an important point that will inform a good deal of the content of this chapter, particularly the latter part. However, Morgan’s own analysis suggests that audiences do not compose the sole proper focus of attention, for he champions a constructivist view of culture which, while decentering institutions as driving forces, nonetheless looks at the “intersection of institutions, authorities, and production with popular practices, circulation, and reception.”

That is, considering a particular medium and its effects as a cultural phenomenon is a multifaceted endeavor, and one of those facets entails attention to institutional forces. In the case of radio and religion, particularly that manifestation of religion falling within the rubric of liberal Protestantism, it is important to have some understanding of the institutional structures at work in the rise of radio as a medium. This is a story that involves the interplay of commerce, religion, and politics.

The history of radio’s development, both as a technological device and as an industry, has been documented by numerous authors, and an expansive recounting is well beyond the scope of this project. Yet, a brief account that details some of the crucial intersections between religion and radio in its developmental period proves fruitful and fascinating. Inventors began working with wireless communication technology in the

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8 Morgan, Key Words, xiii.
10 The following narrative is drawn particularly from Dennis Voskuil, “Reaching Out: Mainline Protestantism and the Media” in Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960, ed. William R. Hutchison (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989): 72-92; Tona Hangen, Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, & Popular Culture in America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); and Jonathan Walton, Watch This! The Ethics and Aesthetics
late nineteenth century, and it was in widespread naval use in the early years of the twentieth century. In the United States, “distance fiend” hobbyists sought to see who could garner broadcasts from the furthest distance. The first regulatory legislation for the medium was passed by Congress and signed by President Taft in 1912, though radio remained an experimental technology for another decade. The first non-experimental broadcast was made by radio station KDKA in Pittsburgh, which was owned and operated by the Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company, and which went on the air just in time to broadcast the results of the presidential election in November, 1920. Two months later, on January 2, 1921, KDKA broadcast the Sunday morning worship service of Calvary Episcopal Church. One of Westinghouse’s engineers was a member of the congregation and had garnered permission for the broadcast from the rector—who, incidentally, did not recognize the historic import of the occasion, and scheduled the associate minister to preach that Sunday. Thus was religious broadcasting born.**11**

Over the next decade, radio transformed from promising experiment to cultural phenomenon, becoming a popular form of entertainment. A look at the proliferation of stations and of receivers is instructive. In 1922, there were 382 radio stations in the country. By 1925, that number had grown to approximately 600 stations, at least 63 of which were owned and operated by churches. Just two years later, the nation was home to some 732 radio stations. Most of these early radio stations consisted of small transmitters operated by electric companies, colleges, churches, department stores, and other

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of Black Televangelism (New York: New York University Press, 2009), along with Smulyan, Selling Radio, and Hilliard and Keith, The Radio Century and Beyond. Additional sources will be noted as appropriate.

11 As an aside evocative of the era’s interfaith work, it is interesting to note that the technical duties of the broadcast were handled by two other Westinghouse engineers, each dressed in a choir robe so as to be as inconspicuous and unobtrusive as possible. One was Jewish, the other Roman Catholic.
organizations seeking to capitalize on the novelty. With the passage of the Radio Act of 1927, however, the government attempted to rein in some of the chaotic growth through the imposition of uniform standards. In particular, the requirement for more powerful and sophisticated transmitters led to the shuttering of many smaller stations. In 1933, the number of church operated stations had dropped to thirty, fewer than half the number of eight years prior. However, the production and dissemination of radios themselves continued apace. Whereas there were approximately 60,000 radios in the country in 1922, that number had increased more than one hundredfold by 1927, to some 6.5 million units. Stewart Hoover notes that, as the Great Depression made more expensive forms of entertainment less available, people turned to radio to fill the void; as Hilliard and Keith note, it was “the principal escape for millions of homeless, hungry, and ill Americans—and for millions more on the edge of poverty.” By 1931, half of all U.S. households owned at least one radio; in 1936, between home units and those installed in automobiles, there were an estimated 30 million radios. And Robert Brown cites contemporary social service reports of the era indicating that poor families would sometimes opt to get rid of their iceboxes or beds before letting go of their radios. Radio had quickly gained the status of a necessity, a consumer good that everyone ought to have.

With such rapid development of the medium, institutional struggles were all but inevitable. In addition to imposing uniform standards, the Radio Act of 1927 also created the Federal Radio Commission (renamed the Federal Communications Commission by the Communications Act of 1934). The commission was given the task of granting and

renewing radio licenses, along with assigning frequency and determining broadcast strength according to a legislative standard of “public interest, convenience, and necessity.” One telling anecdote surrounding the assignment of frequency involves Aimee Semple McPherson and her KFSG (Kall Four Square Gospel) radio station, broadcasting from her Angelus Temple in Los Angeles. In an attempt to avoid the interference which was still common then, and which was one of the reasons behind the federal regulations, KFSG drifted across the dial in search of clear airwaves. Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover opted in 1927 to temporarily shutter the station in order to compel compliance with its assigned frequency, but McPherson put up a fight before acquiescing. She fired off a telegram reading,

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\text{PLEASE ORDER YOUR MINIONS OF SATAN TO LEAVE MY STATION ALONE STOP YOU CANNOT EXPECT THE ALMIGHTY TO ABIDE BY YOUR WAVE LENGTH NONSENSE STOP WHEN I OFFER MY PRAYERS TO HIM I MUST FIT INTO HIS WAVE RECEPTION STOP OPEN THIS STATION AT ONCE.}
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KFSG was soon back on the air, but McPherson’s rhetoric was henceforth more diplomatic.

The incident is amusing, but it is also revealing. On the surface, it is little more than a vignette about a power struggle between a chastened frequency renegade and a new federal regulatory body seeking to wrangle order out of chaos. Yet, the chaos in question was not merely a matter of technical specifications; radio took root within a context of cultural and moral fragmentation attending continued urbanization, and quickly became a subject of intellectual contention. The debate centered on whether radio

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as a form of mass communication would help to unify the diverse strands of American publics or would serve to keep people in pacified ignorance, heightening fragmentation and diminishing communal ties.\textsuperscript{16} Robert S. Fortner encapsulates the conflict nicely as being

between commercialization, competition, and entertainment for a public hungry for diversion on the one hand and public interest broadcasting (defined in middle-class terms), national control, and traditional culture on the other. It was modernity versus civilization; materialism versus tradition; past versus future; dialectic versus affirmation.\textsuperscript{17}

While the legislative standard of “public interest, convenience, and necessity” was not concretely defined by the Radio Act of 1927—nor by the Communications Act of 1934, nor by any other subsequent legislation—the FRC determined that religious broadcasting was, indeed, in the public interest, one of seven such categories that comprised public goods to be encouraged and fostered. However, not all religion was equal in the Commission’s eyes, nor ought every speaker with a religious platform be granted access to the airwaves. Rather, the Commission reallocated broadcast frequencies in favor of stations with well-rounded programming rather than those that gave their airtime over to singular denominational concerns.\textsuperscript{18} In effect, the FRC favored religion that was broad rather than narrowly sectarian and, they thought, likely divisive, and that, through alignment with stations that provided stable frequencies, could arguably be considered both socially prominent and domesticated.


\textsuperscript{18} Hangen, \textit{Redeeming the Dial}, 24.
This latter determination was shared by the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), which formed in 1926 as the first radio network. Stewart Hoover contends that, in the early years of broadcasting, the developing broadcast authorities assumed a role for religious broadcasting and accommodated it as a means of securing their own cultural legitimacy. Assuming that radio audiences would be heterogeneous, they, like the FRC, favored broadly stated religious messages that they thought would appeal to the widest range of people. Reflecting on the so-called fundamentalist-modernist debates roiling Protestant denominations in this period, Fortner notes, “the networks could hardly be blamed for discriminating, if the result would be less controversy on the airwaves, which the networks assumed to be good for business. Religion was too important to allow people to say whatever they pleased. So the radio networks had a preference for control.” In the early years of broadcasting, this worked very well for the Protestant denominations aligned within the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America. NBC relied on the Federal Council for its Protestant programming, which allowed it to maintain contact with a centralized body rather than dealing with representatives and concerns from numerous denominations. One sign of the breadth—or non-specificity—NBC sought in its religious programming is the comment made by a network representative to officials of the Jewish Theological Seminary, which was

19 Hoover, “Audiences.” Hoover addresses his comments on this point to the context of television broadcasting, but the dynamics hold true of radio, as well.
20 Fortner, Radio, Morality, and Culture, 124.
21 Hutchison, Between the Times, viii, refers to these denominations and the networks of relationships formed between them as a “Protestant establishment.”
responsible for Jewish programming, reminding them that they would be “speaking for” all Jews rather than just Conservative Jews.\textsuperscript{22}

In NBC’s formative period, the network’s heads empaneled an advisory board to help counsel it on matters related to programming, censorship, and monopoly.\textsuperscript{23} Charles F. MacFarland, General Secretary of the Federal Council of Churches, was one of the original members. He had been invited to join the Advisory Council, along with Jewish representative Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears, Roebuck, and Company, and Catholic representative Morgan J. O’Brien, an attorney from New York, because NBC officials “knew that religious concerns held overt, dominant positions in the cultural and social milieu of the 1920s.”\textsuperscript{24} Together, these three formed a subcommittee called the Church Council, later renamed the Committee on Religious Activities, which was tasked with developing broadcast policy suggestions that would help the network navigate the tensions of conflicting values in the changing American society. The council recommended a set of five principles that the larger Advisory Council unanimously endorsed at their 1928 meeting:

1. NBC would “serve only the central or national agencies of the three religious faiths . . . as distinguished from individual churches or small groups where national membership was comparatively small.”
2. Religious broadcasts “should be non-sectarian and non-denominational in appeal.”

\textsuperscript{23} Louise M. Benjamin, \textit{The NBC Advisory Council and Radio Programming, 1926-1945} (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007) provides the fullest account, and is the dominant source of information in this paragraph.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 17. It is worth noting that one of the other original members of the Advisory Council was the prominent jurist Charles Evans Hughes, who resigned from the Council in 1930 upon becoming Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court. Hughes was a lifelong Baptist who had been part of one of the Riverside Church’s predecessor congregations, and several pieces of correspondence between Fosdick and Evans indicate Evans was at least a semi-regular visitor at Riverside.
3. Messages should have the widest appeal, presenting the “broad claims of religion . . . which not only aid in building up the personal and social life of the individual but also aid in popularizing religion and the church.”

4. Messages “should interpret religion at its highest and best” so a listener would “realize his responsibility to the organized church and to society.”

5. Broadcasts should be done “by the recognized outstanding leaders of the several faiths.”

NBC adopted the recommendations as policy, which was advantageous for the establishment Protestants. Additionally, the network provided airtime to its religious programs for free, as “sustaining time,” as opposed to commercial, or sponsored, programming. As Hangen notes, “Because religion was thought to provide a public benefit by its mere presence on the air, stations offered sustaining time slots to religious organizations.” As late as 1939, a magazine advertisement promoting NBC’s religious radio programming offered this rationale: “First principle is that time devoted to religion is donated. The reason is obvious. To sell time would give an advantage to the religious organisation [sic] with the most funds available for such use.” It continued, “In general, NBC relies for religious programs on the central or national agencies of the great religious faiths.” NBC considered itself to be serving “the chief faiths,” while allowing its listeners to engage a pluralistic exercise of hearing voices of other traditions—at least, those traditions deemed sufficiently mainstream to garner network airtime. There is another side to this, of course. With religious airtime provided for free, the converse was likewise true: religious airtime could not be purchased. With conservative and fundamentalist groups unable to buy network airtime, establishment Protestants enjoyed a monopoly on the network’s Christian airtime. When Columbia Broadcasting System

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25 Ibid., 50.
26 Hangen, Redeeming the Dial, 12.
27 In Hilliard and Keith, Broadcast Century, 88.
formed in 1927, they did allow religious groups to purchase airtime, but switched to purely sustaining time for religious groups after controversy surrounding broadcasts by Detroit-based Father Charles Coughlin. Mutual Broadcasting System, formed in 1935, accepted only paid programming, so conservative and fundamentalist broadcasters were able to use that network along with independent stations, but during the first decade of network broadcasting, their range was decidedly smaller than that of establishment Protestants.

This development was not unwelcome to the latter. Fosdick expressed it to fellow minister, Rev. Howard Dean French of Brooklyn, who supported church broadcasts but was concerned that airing them during Sunday morning worship hours (as was the initial practice) would discourage people from attending their local congregations. Fosdick argued that radio broadcasts could not be wished out of existence, and that, in addition to making worship services available to many people who could not get to church for various and sundry reasons, the key issue had become one of representation. “It has long since become a question as to what church services are to be broadcast. . . . The query is only whose sermons will be on the air.”28 The irony is that, after network-provided, free “sustaining time” all but disappeared in the 1940s, conservative broadcasters were much better positioned to make use of the medium, drawing on the networks of support and fundraising methods they had developed when they had been shut out of sustaining time. Or, as Quentin J. Schultze contends, “In return for the network promise of free time, [Protestant establishment] broadcasters consigned themselves unwittingly to an ever

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28 Harry Emerson Fosdick to Howard Dean French, November 24, 1926, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, Subseries 4D Box 1 Folder 7. Fosdick sent a virtually identical letter to Mr. J.W. McGavern of Greenwood, NY, on December 2, 1926.
smaller role in the nation’s religious broadcasting . . . [having become] complacent and uncreative about their programming.”29 In the early days of radio, though, the ascendant status of radios as consumer devices and the interest and collaboration of networks gave establishment Protestants, Fosdick among them, a new means by which to exercise their presumed role as custodians of culture.

**Fosdick on the Air**

As the clock hit 5:30 p.m. on Sunday, October 2, 1927, the sound of a church organ arose over NBC’s station WJZ. The male station announcer offered, “Ladies and Gentlemen of the radio audience we now present the National Radio Vespers, a Sunday feature of the National Broadcasting Co., through station WJZ of New York and associated stations. This feature is conducted under the auspices of the Greater New York Federation of Churches, and is endorsed by the Religious Committee of the National Broadcasting Company. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick is the speaker of the hour and he will be assisted in the program by a male ensemble.” According to the script for this inaugural episode of “National Vespers,” four minutes were allotted for this opening. The rest of the program was likewise blocked out: two minutes for an organ prelude; three minutes for Fosdick to read a scriptural call to worship, undergirded by the organ; two minutes for the male quartet to chant Gounod’s “Sanctus” a cappella; three minutes for the quartet to sing the hymn, “Blest be the Tie that Binds,” accompanied by organ; five minutes for Fosdick to read the day’s scripture passage; two minutes for a tenor solo of Scott’s “The Trumpet Shall Sound;” four minutes for the male quartet and organ to

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proceed through an anthem called “Be Strong;” twenty minutes for Fosdick’s sermon, which that day was “The Use and Misuse of Religion;” all followed by a two minute prayer, a three minute hymn, a three minute organ postlude, a two minute piece by the quartet, closing with four minutes for the station announcer to repeat the station and program information and offer the title of the following week’s message.30

The detailed breakdown of the time allocated for each element of the broadcast is indicative of a number of factors. First, it is evident that, prior to its condensation to half an hour, which happened sometime prior to the 1936 season, National Vespers was, indeed, conceived as an approximation of a typical establishment Protestant worship service, with the usual musical, textual, and aural elements included. And just as a worship service requires forethought in crafting the flow of its elements and attending to a general timeframe, so did the radio version, albeit with greater rigidity to its boundaries. Second, the scripting indicates that National Vespers and similar programs were hybrid in nature; while they were meant to function as worship, on the receiving end they brought services into novel settings, and from the production end there was by necessity attention to simultaneous replication and alteration of form and to the likelihood of a much broader and more diverse audience. The question of altering form, for instance, may be seen in the fact that Fosdick’s sermons, which normally consumed about thirty-five minutes, were edited down to twenty for radio. And the speaker’s awareness of audience diversity is encapsulated within Fosdick’s May 23, 1938 comments at a banquet celebrating the fifteenth anniversary of National Religious Radio, in which he noted that, “What one says on the air must be universal, catholic, inclusive, profoundly human. Who of us has not

30 National Vespers script, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4D Box 1 Folder 1.
grown to be a greater man with a stronger grasp on the fundamentals because he has been talking to a continental congregation where he could not rely on interest in particularism but had to strike the great notes and call attention to the wide horizon.\textsuperscript{31}

As Fosdick’s comment to Howard Dean French indicated, the field of religious radio was a domain of competition, with Protestants of various stripes interested in claiming the space of cultural privilege afforded by the new medium’s expansive character. One final observation to make about the National Vespers script here, then, is that it points, if metaphorically, to the planning and process that eventuated in National Vespers itself. Fosdick’s presence on the air developed within the thicket of technological, sociological, and economic factors that had combined to allow radio to gain its cultural foothold; Fosdick’s program underwent a process of development entwined within radio’s own, and Fosdick, despite some initial hesitancy, quickly came to see broadcasting as a means of gaining prominence for liberal Protestant theological, intellectual, and social positions by connecting to a much larger audience. This in turn highlights that, in addition to serving as worship—whether construed as replication or as primary site—the broadcasts also functioned as one more facet of liberal Protestantism’s struggle for and assumption of cultural supremacy.

The impetus for broadcasting did not actually come from Fosdick himself. He was on the pastoral staff at the First Presbyterian Church, with preaching his primary duty, when radio gained its media foothold. On August 14, 1922, Francis Leon Chrisman, manager of a newspaper syndication service, wrote Fosdick to say that he had been working for more than a month to find an electrical company in New York City that

\textsuperscript{31} Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archive at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4D Box 1 Folder 7.
would “broadcast your wonderful sermons Sunday mornings from the Church.” He felt that Fosdick ought to be among the ministers in the rest of the country who broadcast “to tens of thousands every Sunday,” and indicated that his efforts had been spurred by “some of the influential people in your Church.” One of them, Benjamin Demarest—who included personal greetings on the back of the letter—had stayed with Chrisman in Verona, NJ the prior night, where they experienced “how truly wonderful” the radio is when they “heard very plainly and clearly the great Philharmonic Orchestra concerts in the Stadium at 139th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, New York.” Chrisman conveyed his understanding “that all your Trustees think that it would be a fine idea to broadcast your sermons, as you would have an audience of a million or more,” and stated that Fosdick would shortly receive an invitation from Westinghouse, which had a broadcasting facility in Newark.³²

That invitation arrived in the form of an August 17, 1922 letter from Charles B. Popenoe, though the potential audience was a bit smaller than that envisioned by Chrisman. Popenoe wrote of the possibility of broadcasting “religious services from your church known as the First Presbyterian Church of New York, by wireless telephone or radio telephone as it is sometimes called, for the sake of some 350,000 people listening to us every day of the week.” Further, Popenoe mentioned other churches and denominations that were taking advantage of the new communication technology, proffering that, “in every case the most prominent church has been the first to adopt this new science for spreading religion among the people.” Fosdick responded favorably, noting that the matter had already been approved by the Trustees, and that “it seems

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³² Francis Leon Chrisman to Harry Emerson Fosdick, August 14, 1922, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4D Box 1 Folder 6.
unquestionable that the church at Sunday services ought to be glad, and will be glad, to take advantage of the broadcasting opportunity which the new radiophone makes possible.” This was despite being, as he had written both to parishioner Benjamin Demarest and to senior minister George Alexander, “very conservative” in practical matters and therefore slow to act when the possibility of partnering religion and radio first arose.33

As it happened, this first attempt at regular worship broadcasting never materialized. As Popenoe somewhat sheepishly explained to Fosdick weeks later, the aim of carrying his messages from First Presbyterian to the Westinghouse plant in Newark was thwarted by radio politics. AT&T, which owned the telephone lines needed for the transmission, was trying to get into commercial broadcasting, and would not lease the telephone lines to Westinghouse for a format that would compete with them.34 Nonetheless, the foregoing series of exchanges illustrates a number of points. First, simply, was that radio was experienced as a technological marvel that could span tremendous distances and thus offered the potential to exponentially expand the reach of a speaker’s message. Second, the medium did not exist in a vacuum, but within a realm of power and competition—in this case, most obviously, between companies vying to

33 Charles B. Popenoe to Harry Emerson Fosdick, August 17, 1922; Harry Emerson Fosdick to William Demarest, August 18, 1922; and Harry Emerson Fosdick to Rev. George Alexander, September 5, 1922, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4D Box 1 Folder 6.
34 Miller, Harry Emerson Fosdick, 379-388 addresses Fosdick’s radio ministry. However, he gets some of the details wrong, or at least interprets the archival record differently on some minor points. He describes Popenoe as being an “RCA executive and station manager of WJZ” (381) at the time of his initial invitation to Fosdick; yet, the letter from Chrisman and the letterhead on which Popenoe’s invitation were printed both indicate that he was with Westinghouse at that time. He was, however, with RCA by 1924. Additionally, Miller states that Popenoe and Fosdick weren’t able to make a deal in 1922 “for reasons the record does not make clear” (382), apparently missing entirely Popenoe’s explanation to Fosdick about AT&T’s refusal to lease the transmission lines.
position themselves ahead of the field. Thirdly, while this field of competition involved economics, as seen by AT&T’s blockage of Fosdick’s deal with Westinghouse, it also involved the search for cultural authority; as previously noted, radio authorities actively sought to recruit religious figures, at least in part so that they could claim their cultural capital in order to legitimize the medium.³⁵ Fourth, as the actions of Demarest and the First Church Board of Trustees make clear, there was an element of prestige to be gained on the part of a congregation and its parishioners by having its minister featured prominently on the radio. This was reinforced several years later, when the editors of Riverside’s *Church Monthly* used this point to solicit congregational support. “If one were attempt personally to distribute *The Church Monthly* to our subscription list he would have to make a trip around the world,” wrote the editors. Even so, “Our ministry has one even more astonishing capacity to project itself outside our immediate environment in the radio services which Dr. Fosdick conducts over WJZ on Sunday afternoons. This congregation cannot be counted but its interest and responsiveness register in innumerable ways.” Thus the appeal for support, which allowed for the magnification of Fosdick’s message and thereby of the church’s influence. “The very thought of such a group ‘listening in’ is a great joy. To share in the support of a work which is contributing to this amazingly widespread and influential ministry is a surpassing privilege.”³⁶

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³⁵ The concept of cultural capital comes from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. As the editor of one of his collections summarizes it, “One of the central ideas of Bourdieu’s work…is the idea that there are different forms of capital: not only ‘economic capital’ in the strict sense…but also [such forms as] ‘cultural capital’ (i.e. knowledge, skills and other cultural acquisitions, as exemplified by educational or technical qualifications)…[which may be] converted into another form” of capital. John B. Thompson, “Editor’s Indroduction,” in Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 14.
³⁶ “A Word Concerning the Budget,” *Church Monthly*, March 1930, 89.
A series of communiques from 1929 and 1930 demonstrate how easily and thoroughly the final two points above could be entangled. In 1929, James Colgate wrote to John D. Rockefeller, Jr. proxy W.S. Richardson, seeking Rockefeller’s participation in a sustaining committee that NBC officials and Fosdick alike hoped would underwrite the expenses of National Vespers. Colgate closed his appeal by noting that he had been “hearing from these services in conversations with people from various parts of the country in a way which satisfies me that their influence is very far reaching and of great value.” The following January, Rockefeller, Jr.’s son, John D. Rockefeller III, prepared a memorandum for his father about the former’s financial investment in National Vespers. It indicated that Rockefeller, Jr. had joined with Colgate and with Edward Ballard—all three of them longstanding and prominent congregational leaders of Riverside and its predecessor congregations—to underwrite $6,000 of the program’s $11,455 in expenses, which were expected to rise to $15,000 for the upcoming year. Rockefeller, Jr. gave his permission to underwrite all or part of the program for that year, up to the projected $15,000. He told his son, “I regard these radio talks as of a value that it would be hard to overestimate. Through them Dr. Fosdick’s words are brought to many people all over the country who could never hear him otherwise.”

37 James B. Colgate to W.S. Richardson, November 30, 1929; John D. Rockefeller III to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., January 17, 1930, memorandum; John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to John D. Rockefeller III, January 29, 1930, Rockefeller Archive Center, Rockefeller Family Collection, Record Group 3, Series E, Box 135, Folder 1187.
the field in 1930, along with the fact that, from 1930-1934, Rockefeller gave money to the National Council on Radio in Education.\(^3^8\)

Two other, earlier, pieces of correspondence involving Fosdick’s early radio appearances shed further light on Fosdick’s own thought processes related to broadcasting, and on the simultaneous enthusiasm and anxieties of the parties involved in production and distribution. The first is from another exchange between Fosdick and Popenoe, this time when the latter was with RCA. The two were in the process of agreeing to a deal that would have Fosdick travel to Aeolian Hall (which Miller suggestively refers to as “the temple of established culture”) on fifteen Sunday afternoons or evenings from October 12, 1924 through March 22, 1925 to preach from the studio.\(^3^9\)

Fosdick once again asserts that the idea of broadcasting was not his own, but that he would be happy to take on the assignment. He then proceeds to address a question Popenoe had raised about theological controversy, acknowledging that the fundamentalist-modernist battles of the era may have given people the impression that he was a controversialist, but asserting that controversy rarely entered into his regular preaching. He continues,

I thoroughly sympathize with you in the understanding that over the radio it would be a quite unpardonable breach of courtesy and good taste to introduce controversy in any way, shape, or manner. . . . I am, of course, a Christian preacher, but I should constantly keep in mind that I was dealing not simply with modernists and fundamentalists over the radio, but also with Roman Catholics and

\(^3^8\) Raymond Fosdick, “Memorandum on Radio,” February 11, 1930, Rockefeller Archive Center, Rockefeller Family Collection, Record Group 3, Series E, Box 135, Folder 1186; National Council on Radio in Education, Rockefeller Archive Center, Rockefeller Family Collection, Record Group 3, Series E, Box 135, Folder 1188.

\(^3^9\) Miller, Harry Emerson Fosdick, 382. The phrase is in quotation marks, but since Miller does not specify his sources, it is impossible to tell from whence he has drawn this description. Nonetheless, the phrase, in conjunction with Fosdick’s agreement with Popenoe, is highly evocative of the way in which mainline Protestantism sought to culturally situate itself.
Jews, and I do not see how anything offensive to any group could properly be put upon the air from your studio.  

The import of this comment is twofold. On the one hand, it is evidence of the still-tenuous nature of radio, insofar as Popenoe and RCA were eager to create an audience that was broad in scope. If they were to trade on the presumed cultural authority of religion in doing so, they wanted to ensure that the religious messages they broadcast were not likely to alienate particular publics whom they saw as viable listeners. Radio authorities sought to position the medium as a public good, and courting controversial speakers would work against this purpose. On Fosdick’s side, this broadness was likewise desirable. For Fosdick, representative of liberal Protestantism, radio presented another manifestation of his tradition’s public presence. And his assertion that he could successfully speak to numerous and diverse constituencies suggests, perhaps with a touch of irony, an assumption of universality on the part of liberal Protestantism, a conviction that a well reasoned discourse would be able to win the vast majority of people to its viewpoint.

The second piece of correspondence is an October 28, 1927 letter Fosdick wrote to John Haynes Holmes, pastor of the Community Church of New York. Holmes was considering the prospect of going on the air himself, and directed a series of questions to

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40 Harry Emerson Fosdick to Charles B. Popenoe, September 30, 1924, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4D Box 1 Folder 6.

41 The irony is illustrated in a letter sent to Fosdick from a former Park Avenue Baptist Church member who had moved to Los Angeles. In a postscript to a 1930 letter, Anna L. Moore importuned, “Dear Dr. Fosdick, I have just been listening to Wilfred Glenn over the Radio. When is your voice going to come to California? It is needed here. Local preachers broadcast theology and worse. The Catholic hour brings us defense of a church organization. This is a cry from Macedonia.” Moore was precisely the sort of listener that network heads envisioned, and that Fosdick saw as a core constituency—those who yearned for an expression of religion that was reasonable and generic, rather than partisan and particular. Anna L. Moore to Harry Emerson Fosdick, August 30, 1930, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4A Box 2 Folder 1.
his ministerial colleague. Fosdick’s response was largely logistical in nature, noting, for instance, that his Sunday broadcasts had moved to the afternoons because New York City’s two large stations, WEAF and WJZ, had been joined together by the creation of NBC, which had decided to uniformly follow WEAF’s policy of not broadcasting religious programs on Sunday mornings. Of greater interest, though, is the insight that the letter offers into Fosdick’s own early assessment of the relationship between radio and church attendance, particularly as it centered on the preacher’s personality and the ideas being broadcast. Addressing the conventional worry that people would replace going to church with tuning in by radio, Fosdick expressed his own inclination “to think that it tends greatly to increase the attendance, especially on the part of out-of-town people. A considerable portion of my Sunday morning congregation is made up of people from out-of-town who have heard me over the radio and wish to see the Indian whom they have listened to.”\(^{42}\) Aside from the incidental racial tone-deafness and anecdotal nature of the conclusion, the statement illustrates that Fosdick himself had come to see his radio broadcasts as maintaining a symbiotic relationship to Sunday morning worship. They were replications of original worship events which also existed as events in themselves, but which also served as impetus, at least for some listeners, to seek out those original, in-person events, too.

Of course, Fosdick did not expect the out-of-towners to come back week after week. And there were many more listeners who would never make it into the sanctuary who nonetheless tuned in regularly because they found intellectual and spiritual kinship with the minister and the congregation gathered around him by virtue of the ideas that the

\(^{42}\) Harry Emerson Fosdick to John Haynes Holmes, October 28, 1927, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4D Box 1 Folder 7.
minister conveyed over the air. This kinship was very real to Fosdick, if less visceral than
the more obviously embodied version. As he expressed it to Holmes, “I think it would be
possible for you . . . to build up a radio church with folk who feel themselves more or less
closely related to you. . . . I feel clear that there are folk who would be very grateful to
feel themselves more or less steadily related to some preacher whose opinions they share
and whose sermons are helpful to them.”

Fosdick’s own project of building a radio church through the National Vespers
program spanned nearly two decades, running from its inception in 1927 through the
Great Depression and the end of World War II. From an initial broadcast over sixteen
stations, the program reached a peak of 125 stations airing it. Fosdick was broadcast via
shortwave radio to places as far flung as Cuba, England, New Zealand, and Iran. The
radio church became quite extensive, building up a large following of people who felt
themselves “more or less closely related to” Fosdick, as evidenced by the voluminous
correspondence that the program garnered. According to a brief historic statement on
National Vespers, written by Frank Goodman for the Federal Council of Churches and
undated but clearly composed near the end of Fosdick’s run on the program, the
“potential listening audience of twenty five millions of people . . . have written over one
million letters to Dr. Fosdick in the past 17 years.” While Goodman may be a bit
overeager in declaring this as “undoubtedly . . . a record of broadcasting,” he
documents the deep and wide appeal of National Vespers insofar as, “Including those of
different faiths, 742,984 persons living in all parts of the United States and Canada have
asked for, and received copies of Dr. Fosdick’s radio sermons.”

It is this nexus of audience, program, and speaker that marks National Vespers as a proper venue for exploring liberal Protestantism and the social gospel as living and shifting phenomena during Fosdick’s years on the air. Yet, Goodman’s statistic about listeners receiving printed copies of Fosdick’s sermons reinforces and serves as reminder that Fosdick’s cultural manifestation was multifaceted, and that his airwave presence occurred in conjunction with his print presence. Thus, I broaden the focus here to include a brief analysis of Protestant utilization of print media and the development of Fosdick’s own print presence. The remainder of the chapter will then turn to some of the correspondence between Fosdick and his audiences in an effort to gain insight into Fosdick’s message in its reception functioned as a manifestation of liberal Protestantism’s Depression era lived tradition.

**Reading Into Things**

Reading and listening form two distinct, if not unrelated, activities, involving as they do two modes of sensory apperception which may at least potentially lead to differing affective responses, comprehension, and utilization of content by consumers. Perusing a printed sermon involves the eyes in a way that tuning into a radio broadcast does not; conversely, a National Vespers service transmitted Fosdick’s voice to his listeners’ ears while his readers were left to conjure that sound internally, via imagination or memory. The printed word does not bear the same temporal limitations in its delivery as does the spoken word. A sermon, whether in person or on the air, is an event; a book, however, holds a tactile form that may be utilized according to the consumer’s own
timeframe. Particular readers or auditors may find either activity to be more or less conducive to comprehension or retention, may prefer the relative permanence of print or the perceived intimacy of a speaker’s voice entering living space. Correspondence from Fosdick’s radio listeners, which will be addressed in the subsequent section of this chapter, suggests that the development of the new medium did in some ways allow for the broadening and deepening of the communication of Fosdick’s personality. At the same time, this did not happen in a vacuum; many listeners were also readers who, for instance, may have purchased Fosdick’s books, read his words in magazines, or sent one of the 742,984 requests for copies of radio sermons (each of which was honored at no cost). The effects of different forms of mediation may have been distinct, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that they were mutually exclusive; indeed, letters to Fosdick would seem to indicate that they often overlapped. Thus, because Fosdick’s message was read as well as heard, it is necessary to direct some attention toward Protestant practices of reading and the import of the printed word.

In his study of religious publishing in the U.S. in the nineteenth century, David Paul Nord argues for a linkage between the birth of mass media and the printing and distribution of religious tracts and Bibles. He contends that doctrine and the family and social organization of New England Puritanism prior to 1800 nurtured a penchant for print out of which religious printing entrepreneurialism grew, for “reading the word was the means through which God’s grace came to humankind.”  

44 The story he tells is one of religious publishing as existing at an intersection of faith and economics, as publishers sought to create and distribute alternatives to print-as-entertainment. There was what
Klassen has called “a particularly textual piety among nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Protestants” that encouraged the production of religious print.\textsuperscript{45}

Voskuil documents that, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Protestant religious press was moving toward the margins of the print industry, insofar as “few Protestant periodicals attracted general readership after 1900,” though “the Protestant perspective continued to be read in nonreligious papers and journals.” For evidence of this latter point, it is necessary only to look as far as Fosdick’s regular presence in popular productions such as \textit{Reader’s Digest} and \textit{Ladies Home Journal}, or to observe that the entirety of his 1932 volume \textit{As I See Religion} had appeared over the course of two years as a series of sporadic essays in \textit{Harpers}. Dennis Voskuil ties the hardening of the boundaries between liberals and conservatives within the establishment Protestant denominations in the early twentieth century in part to shifts in religious publishing. Liberals, he suggests, faced a twofold issue: “[I]t was not merely a question of maintaining media influence in secular society; it was also a matter of retaining control of the Protestant share of the religious media in the face of conservative evangelical activity arising within the establishment and to some extent beyond it.”\textsuperscript{46}

Of course, there is always an extent to which printed matter is out of the publisher’s control once it has been distributed. Nord documents that religious publishers in the nineteenth century sought to teach people to approach reading as a “serious, thoughtful, and intensive” activity,\textsuperscript{47} but he also interprets contemporary material suggesting that many readers approached it, even with religious texts, as anything but.

\textsuperscript{45} Pamela Klassen, “Textual Healing: Mainstream Protestants and the Therapeutic Text, 1900-1925,” \textit{Church History} 75, no. 4 (December 2006): 810.
\textsuperscript{46} Dennis Voskuil, “Reaching Out,” 74.
\textsuperscript{47} Nord, \textit{Faith in Reading}, 10.
Similarly, Klassen argues “that the centrality of texts for Protestants also has a
talismanic—or therapeutic—dimension. Inhabiting a ‘strange world of textual intimacy’
in which Bibles were read and analyzed but also nuzzled and heard to speak, mainstream
Protestants have also granted the book ritualized and therapeutic powers, however
concealed by the primacy of the their use of texts as intellectual or doctrinal tools.”48

The struggles for control noted by Voskuil were linked to the notion that
Protestant habits of reading could, by the action of reading itself and the content that was
consumed, be constitutive of religious identity. Books, sermons, articles—all could
function, whether in ideology, imagination, or local context, to link people together
through the consideration of shared questions, arenas and modes of argumentation,
rhetoric, phrases, imagery held in common. Protestant publications could, to draw on
Benedict Anderson’s terminology, serve as one means of creating “imagined
communities” of Protestants of particular stripes. Anderson paid specific attention to
newspapers, conceiving of their reading as a “mass ceremony” that takes place “in the
lair of the skull,” but with the awareness that it “is being replicated by thousands (or
millions) of others of whose existence [the reader] is confident, yet or whose identity [the
reader] has not the slightest notion.” At the same time, the newspaper reader who sees

48 Klassen, “Textual Healing,” 812. Certainly, Fosdick’s writing was not immune to other-than-intended
usage, as is clear from at least one letter he saved. One reader writes about her copy of The Meaning of
Prayer, which she received as an Easter gift in 1926, that, “I take the book up almost daily, ask God to
guide the reading (especially when I am in trouble) and it seems incredible [sic] that my thumb nail,
perhaps with a page or two also turned as well (all this without sight) and my hand, thumb or finger will
press on just the paragraph, that I believe, would be most elucidating to my query.” Mrs. E.D. Potter to
Harry Emerson Fosdick, 9/16/55, personal correspondence, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The
Burke Library Archives, Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2B Box 2 Folder 13. Underlining in
original.
other people reading copies of the exact same newspaper “is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life.”49

As the period after the First World War saw consumer culture reach a fuller flourishing, however, Protestant print practices became about more than the act of reading itself; increasingly, they were also about the promotion and acquisition of particular texts or types of reading material. In this period, argues Matthew Hedstrom, “a modernizing book business and a modernizing religious liberalism together facilitated wider spiritual horizons for a great many middle-class Americans.” Print consumption as a religious act involved purchasing as well as reading. “In material ways that go beyond adherence to broad cultural norms, participation in religious and spiritual life happens through commodities bought and sold, and for much of the twentieth century the most significant of these religious commodities was the book.”50 Fosdick’s books and articles provided ideas, interpretation, encouragement, challenge, inspiration—but they also provided individuals within an increasingly mass consumer culture material goods by which they could experience a sense of connection with the author himself and with others who owned and read his works. Their reading material bolstered their sense of identity and purpose. As will become clear below in my analysis of correspondence, Fosdick’s radio broadcasts, as well as the radios which facilitated them, could function in a very similar, often complementary, manner.

Klassen contends, “Media—whether newspapers, radio, television, or the internet—are deeply formative of religious identity by including clerical and lay religious

actors within certain networks of knowledge and inculcating within them certain habits of devotional practice (and/or entertainment).”\textsuperscript{51} Fosdick, naturally, was located on the “clerical actors” side of Klassen’s equation, and his production during the 1930s was steady. He likewise found a steady audience of “lay religious actors.” Precise sales figures have proven difficult to locate, but one indicator of Fosdick’s level of production and sizable reading public may be found in Louis Schneider and Sanford M. Dornbusch’s 1958 study of “inspirational religious literature,” in which they engage in content analysis of forty-six bestselling volumes published from 1875-1955.\textsuperscript{52} Fosdick shows up three times on their list, with numerous other of his books excluded because Schneider and Dornbusch did not want their study skewed by overrepresentation of an author. The three Fosdick works they chose—\textit{Twelve Tests of Character} (1923), \textit{As I See Religion} (1932), and \textit{On Being a Real Person} (1943)—were selected because they appeared on Publishers Weekly bestseller lists. Left out were eleven other of Fosdick’s books, including all five volumes of sermons that he published from 1933 to 1941. Yet, as late as 1950, Schneider and Dornbusch note that these books still appeared in a trade publication that offered booksellers not specializing in religious works advice on religious titles to include in their inventory. Clearly, Fosdick and his audiences found ample mediated meeting space.

\textbf{Media as Religion}

When, in the early 1920s, I undertook the broadcasting of my sermons, I had only dim prevision of the possibilities. Sceptical of the new medium for religious purposes, I rather listlessly began talking into that strange, uninspiring contrivance—the microphone. Later the microphone became to me almost as stirring as a great congregation. The reason, of course,

\textsuperscript{51} Klassen, “Textual Healing.” 819.
was the letters that poured in—grateful, intimate, presenting vital personal and domestic problems. These letters came from all imaginable human situations, from hospitals and prisons, from universities and legislatures, from cities and from lonely homes on the frontiers. It was evident that the radio—and later television—could be a medium of vital personal communication.53

As noted earlier in the chapter, media and communications theorists have increasingly taken a cultural turn in their work, which has led to a body of fruitful thought on the intersections of media and religion.54 This was presaged even by Carey’s own choice of the term “ritual” to describe his preferred conceptualization of communication. This cultural turn in media studies dovetails nicely with a similar move in religious studies. For instance, Hoover argues in Religion in the Media Age that religion and media in modernity occupy the same spaces, have similar purposes, and instigate shared practices of making meaning; they are fundamentally related. This is met in the field of religious studies by works that focus on audiences, that is, on receivers rather than senders as agents of meaning construction.55 This decenters any institutionally-based narrative assuming a static handing down of meaning or dogma in favor of what has been termed “lived religion,” in which religious resources such as ritual, symbol, and narrative become partially or wholly uncoupled from their traditional

53 Harry Emerson Fosdick, undated personal reflection, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 3C Box 2 Folder 5.
55 Hangen, Redeeming the Dial; Shandler, Jews, God, and Videotape; Walton, Watch This! This could also be extended by way of analogy into that subset of religious studies dealing with material culture, of which two good examples are Colleen McDannell, Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) and David Morgan, Religion and Material Culture (New York: Routledge, 2009).
structures as they intersect with and interact with the everyday elements of practitioners’ lives; indeed, Richard Wightman Fox has termed the attention turned to the intersections of belief and practice a “culturalist turn” in religious history. Within this line of thought, Robert Orsi has characterized religion as denoting relationships between individuals and supernatural beings, connections which mediate people’s relationships with each other through the construction of worldviews and the passing on of social scripts. Theorists such as Hoover, who are taking religion seriously in their work, argue for similar dynamics in media.

This is the insight that lies behind Morgan’s assertion, cited at the start of this chapter, that media, rather than being reducible to an array of devices unidirectionally delivering content, imply “the generation of experiences, forms of shared consciousness, communion, or community that allow people to assemble meanings that articulate and extend their relations to one another.” Applying this insight to Fosdick and his 1930s audiences requires a modicum of creativity. The culturalist approach, interested as it is in the experiences of media consumers, is dependent upon ethnographic research. Contemporary audiences are available for interviews in ways that historical audiences simply are not, which means that a different sort of ethnographic evidence is called for. In the case of Fosdick’s audiences, those who coalesced around the frequency waves bearing his voice and the pages conveying his words, the letters which they left behind present an ethnographic window into their voices and thoughts.


In her study of evangelical radio and popular culture, Tona Hangen asserts that “fan mail as a historical source leaves much to be desired, being impossible to quantify and representative of such a small sample of listeners.” Smulyan adds the critical point that, while listeners “often wrote to radio stations . . . the letters that survive were culled to support the broadcasters’ contention that radio constituted a perfect advertising medium.” While this is an important critique, it is equally important to note in regard to Fosdick’s radio-sparked fan mail that National Vespers was among NBC’s sustaining time programming, meaning that it did not receive commercial support; thus, letters arriving at network headquarters for or related to Fosdick’s program didn’t carry the same meaning for network executives as would those bearing on programs sponsored by advertisers. And Hangen herself successfully demonstrates that sufficient listener correspondence exists “to suggest the ethos of a religious community, one with clear hopes and plans for America’s future and for the role of believers in that future.”58 While Hangen studied evangelical broadcasters and their audiences, a very similar point—if with a different constellation of hopes and plans—may be made regarding Fosdick’s books and National Vespers broadcasts.

The archival material, of course, is incomplete. Even were the million pieces of correspondence related to National Vespers claimed by Frank Goodman all still extant and archived, available to the researcher with sufficiently voluminous time, energy, and mental capacity to sort through and interpret them all, the entirety of Fosdick’s listening and reading audiences, their motivations, their listening experiences, their hopes, prayers, and convictions would still not be exhaustively expressed. Yet, the same would be true.

58 Hangen, Redeeming the Dial, 18; Smulyan, Selling Radio, 7.
were those audiences available for interview; all evidence is incomplete. Certainly those letters which have been archived are partial—both in the sense of representing only a portion of the correspondence which was sent and in the sense that Fosdick (and his secretaries) made conscious decisions about what to save and what not to save. However, while vastly outnumbered by positive sentiments, there are enough letters saved which take issue with and level criticism at Fosdick to give the clear impression that Fosdick’s own archival process was not simply about hagiography or self-deification. Thus, it is my contention that the archived correspondence pertaining to Fosdick’s radio broadcasts and published work issues a clear, if necessarily incomplete and suggestive, picture of the values, hopes, and experiences that were gathered within the liberal Protestantism which Fosdick represented and mediated. The archive also offers Fosdick’s responses to many of his correspondents (which quite possibly may have been one criterion which helped determine whether a letter made it into the archive or not). Further, in regard to National Vespers, the archive preserves some of Fosdick’s written reflections on broadcasting. These latter sources in particular make possible an analysis of a factor that is underrepresented in the literature: namely, broadcasting as a religious act on the part of the broadcaster.59 Because radio offered a new and therefore novel form of mediation during the interwar period, whereas print media were well established, my focus below is much more heavily weighted toward radio correspondence. However, it will become clear that both forms of mediation were important in the dissemination of Fosdick’s message, and that the two often worked in tandem.

59 Hangen is a notable exception here, nicely weaving together descriptions and interpretations of the religious meaning and importance of broadcasting to broadcasters and audiences alike.
One observation that strikes the reader fairly early on when looking through the folders of letters sent to Fosdick is just how many fellow Protestant clergy wrote to him. Some, such as Norman Kunkel, whose letter is noted at the chapter’s start, were former students or colleagues who found their connection with Fosdick rekindled across boundaries of time and space as Fosdick’s voice traveled from New York and met them in their living rooms. The vividness of this sense of connection in and of itself should not be minimized, but there are additional layers of import evident within the clergy letter, as well. As Fosdick established himself as a regular on-air entity in National Vespers at the end of 1927, the sharpened rifts of the fundamentalist-modernist controversies within the mainline Protestant denominations were palpable. Even as fundamentalist positions lost ground within denominational bodies and many fundamentalists took refuge within parachurch networks—such as their own radio programs—many moderate and liberal clergy within the Protestant denominations looked to Fosdick to set the tone for their theological positions. As Rev. Walter F. Tunks, Rector of St. Paul’s Parish in Muskegon, Michigan wrote in a letter of appreciation for Fosdick’s 1927 Christmas sermon, “You know, I am sure, how many of the layity [sic] of this country look to you as their interpreter of religion, but I wonder if you realize how many of the clergy claim you as their leader? I can speak for one man who would not be in the ministry today, except for the courage he has found in your broad and liberal interpretation of the old

60 For an account detailing Fosdick’s place within these theological skirmishes, see Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick*, 112-173.

Similarly Methodist Episcopal Rev. Charles Brodhead of Jenkintown, Pennsylvania offered his “deep personal appreciation for your sermons to me every Sunday afternoon over WJZ,” some of which reached directly into his “moods of . . . discouragement for timely inspiration.” And both of these sentiments, of course, overlap Rev. Ernest Howse’s assertion in the chapter epigraph about the impact of Fosdick’s books.

Not all clergy who wrote to Fosdick had entirely positive comments, of course, even among those who generally agreed with his theological positions. Presbyterian minister George L. Willets of Columbus, Ohio, for instance, who called himself one of Fosdick’s admirers—“I read your books and frequently listen to you over the radio”—was discouraged that Fosdick had offered qualified praise for Christian Science, asserting that Fosdick had damaged his attempts to “win back” a local lawyer who had been drawn to that church. “A minister of the Gospel who broadcasts has a marvelous opportunity to cooperate with that which is worthy in the church but, on the other hand, just a remark of this kind may cause the church to lose some that it might otherwise win.” Fosdick retorted that he had received a letter on the same sermon that upbraided from the other direction because he had qualified his praise. “The plain fact is,” he argued, “that one cannot say anything on any subject without having people with strong biases take it one way or another according to their biases.”

62 Rev. Walter F. Tunks to Harry Emerson Fosdick, December 26, 1927, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2A Box 10 Folder 12.  
63 Rev. Charles Brodhead to Harry Emerson Fosdick, January 3, 1929, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4D Box 1 Folder 7.  
64 George L. Willets to Harry Emerson Fosdick, December 4, 1928; Harry Emerson Fosdick to George L. Willets, December 8, 1928, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2A Box 5 Folder 9.
Another clerical listener described a much more personal chastening. A Lutheran minister in Nebraska wrote in 1930 to describe a painful dissonance in his listening one Sunday. Fosdick preached a sermon entitled, “Challenge or Compromise,” which inspired this minister to send along a copy of a sermon he had preached several months prior at an event commemorating the 400th anniversary of the reading of the Augsburg Confession. He sent the sermon as “an illustration of what happens when the preacher ventures upon a challenge instead of a compromise.” In his case, it was a five-month long heresy trial, which ended with him signing the doctrinal paragraph of the synodical constitution in order to keep his job.65

The notes of critique in these two clergy letters are important for what they suggest about the role of broadcasting in liberal Protestantism and about Fosdick’s place within the larger meeting of media, values, and experience. From different angles, the two letters reveal that liberal Protestants very much considered themselves to be in a struggle for cultural and ecclesiastical supremacy—on the one side against external groups from whom they had to “win” adherents (especially, one might infer from Willets’ letter, adherents bearing social capital), and on the other side against conservatives within the denominational structures of power and influence. Both suggest a feeling of the tenuous nature of liberal positions in these struggles, and of the ambivalent power of the mediated figurehead, to whom they looked for inspiration and leadership, to give voice to their movement, to bolster their own convictions, as well as to provide a mediated undergirding to the embodied actions they took within their own communities. This sense of the unsettled and potentially dangerous aspects, especially of the radio pulpit, that

65 Schedule of Destroyed Letters, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2A Box 1 Folder 1.
these letters to Fosdick demonstrate simultaneously serves to illustrate the hopes with which many liberal Protestants invested their movement’s spokespersons.

**Complementary Platforms**

Fosdick did loom large in this latter category as someone whom many of his clerical correspondents saw as a resource from which they could draw. As should be clear, this was not limited to his presence on the airwaves; his radio persona cannot be extricated from the authorial success that predated and augmented his broadcasts. Well before the advent of National Vespers, Walter Hannah, a Congregationalist Sunday school instructor in West Haven, Connecticut, wrote to express his appreciation for an address Fosdick had given over the radio on December 7, 1924. Hannah taught a class of older teenaged boys each week, and his aim as an instructor articulated a key liberal concern “to teach that which would never have to be unlearned and also that which would be an insult to no one’s intellect.” In this endeavor he had made use of Fosdick’s *Christianity and Progress* and *Modern Use of the Bible*. He had also given his students each a copy of Fosdick’s *Twelve Tests of Character* as summer reading. He ended his letter with the assertion to Fosdick that, “you are doing me a favor personally in giving your time and strength to the Sunday afternoon broadcasting as many of the boys have sets and are interested listeners.” Text and broadcast wove together to create Fosdick as multifaceted resource for a liberal Protestant Sunday school.

A similar interweaving is evident in a November 23, 1933 letter from Rev. William L. Stidger of Morgan Memorial Church in Boston, Massachusetts. He offers

66 Walter Hannah to Harry Emerson Fosdick, December 7, 1924, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4D Box 1 Folder 7.
thanks “for the inspiration your Radio sermons have been to me for I listen to them religiously every Sunday and from time to time take them to my classes in homiletics” at Boston University School of Theology, which was one of liberal Protestantism’s flagship seminaries. The usefulness in this regard of the sermon that prompted his letter was enhanced by the fact that he found it, serendipitously, in the copy of Fosdick’s recently-published collection, *Hope of the World*, which had just been sent to him by the publisher. Summing up the symbiotic nature of Fosdick’s presence on page and ether, he offers thanks for “innumerable pertinent quotable sentences I have grabbed out of the air and from your books and have used in sermons and lectures for years.” Of particular note is Stidger’s assessment of an illustration that Fosdick used in his sermon. “I think that I have never heard a personality get out over the air as you did in the story of the boy and his war-memory story of killing that German lad. I wept a bit over that, and I have a feeling that you must have also. I felt your voice break over it. Still they say that personality cannot get out over the air. But it does.”

The language of Stidger’s assessment is significant, for his emphasis on the term “personality” highlights that Fosdick and he shared a philosophical framework; indeed, Stidger’s academic home at the Boston University School of Theology was particularly notable for its personalist philosophy. Of particular import is Stidger’s note of thanks to Fosdick “for a well-balanced preaching of the Individual or Personal, and the Social Gospel. You have helped us all in that way.” His insistence that personality could be

67 Rev. William L. Stidger to Harry Emerson Fosdick, November 23, 1933, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2B Box 1 Folder 19.
transmitted over the air was an assertion that radio broadcasting itself was consonant with the aims of social gospel-inflected liberal Protestantism. There was a fundamental harmony between the broadcast preacher’s preaching and the human agency and partnership with God by which the kingdom of God was to become manifest in the world. Implicit in this was the complementary claim, seen in Stidger’s plan to utilize the published version of the broadcast sermon in his homiletics class, that print could also mediate personality in important ways. Both technologies of mass mediation allowed the transmission of the preacher’s personality in such a way as to allow for impact on the social world.

**Intimacy and Embodiment**

Issues of intimacy and embodiment likewise come to the fore in examining mediated religion. With Fosdick’s print presence, this often seems to have occurred in situations of vulnerability. This may be seen in the 1930 letter from Brown University Student Counselor O.T. Gilmore that opens chapter one, detailing a student’s letter about finding solace in crisis through reading Fosdick’s *The Manhood of the Master*. In the student’s time of depression, Fosdick’s own reflection on Christ’s anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane functioned as meeting point between author, reader, and divine which allowed the student to weather his crisis. Similar sentiments may be seen in a letter from Charlotte Atwater, who wrote in 1933 to thank Fosdick for his concern during her husband’s illness. Her husband had asked her, she wrote, to let Fosdick know that his sermons had been a source of strength. “I do not know how to tell you that,” she wrote, “except to say that we have used the Litany of Praise so often that the children know it by
heart as they do the familiar psalms . . . [and] that when Rex’s Father died (he had been a member of our household for several years) we used parts of your prayer from Dr. Wolfkin’s [sic] service.” Finally, she noted that, “Rex wanted me to read aloud part of ‘Life’s Second Bests’ when we thought both eyes might go. I presume there are many of us blundering folk whose spiritual eyes have been restored or kept in better repair by God through your thinking.”

Equally striking are the descriptions of listening as an intimate act that pervade the letters from Fosdick’s radio audience. In the letter from Rev. Charles Brodhead discussed above, Brodhead describes Fosdick’s sermons as being delivered directly to him in his moods of discouragement. Similarly, William P. Shriver of Ridgewood, New Jersey, who labels himself as among the “professional religionists” (and whom Fosdick addresses in his reply as “My dear Billy”), describes himself as having “listened intimately, intently, with eagerness to your sermon about God,” which “found” him “groping about” as “a lonely and detached spirit.”

Shortly after that exchange, Rev. Spenser Meeser wrote from his post at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, to convey the vividness of his experiences tuning in to hear Fosdick. “When home, I worship with Park Avenue Baptist Church,” he wrote. The verb is important: he did not merely listen, but rather felt himself to be personally joined in worship with a congregation that was physically located in a distant physical space. His language makes explicit the polysemous nature of “mediation” that Hoover has suggested, as the service, mediated via radio, functioned as religious event in an Orsian

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69 Charlotte Atwater to Harry Emerson Fosdick, November 10, 1933, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2A Box 1 Folder 9.
70 William P. Shriver to Harry Emerson Fosdick, October 24, 1926, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4D Box 1 Folder 7.
sense to generate a bodily response within Meeser such that he experienced himself as connected to, perhaps even somehow present with, his friend Fosdick, Fosdick’s congregation as he imagined it, and, with and through them, to God. “I sing with you, pray with you, try to profit by your word, weep with mingled joy and grief (even when you do not), and thank God for you and your ministry, by radio, as in your meeting house.” Far from being a disembodied medium, the radio broadcasts of worship services as Meeser describes them were quite visceral events.

The transformation of space was twofold; if radio elicited reactions of body and imagination that in some sense took the listener outside of intimate space, it also invited the outside world of the broadcast into that same intimate space. Susanna Mead Kellogg and her husband, George, knew Fosdick from his pastorate at First Presbyterian Church, but were not often able to attend church due to Mr. Kellogg’s employment situation. Susanna wrote that they wanted Fosdick “to know how much joy and stimulus the sermons are bringing to us here in our little living-room each Sunday morning.” About the change wrought in their intimate living space, she exclaimed, “And now the radio has transformed our lives, as well as those of countless others!” In contrast to the regret of regularly missing Sunday worship—due, Mrs. Kellogg explained, to the very real and anxious possibility of getting Mr. Kellogg’s bone-weary body to church early enough to stand in line for admission only to be denied entry if the seats were all filled—the new reality was that, “We look forward to each Sunday morning with joyous anticipation and oh! we find ourselves so in accord with you.”

71 Spenser B. Meeser to Harry Emerson Fosdick, November 21, 1926, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4D Box 1 Folder 7.
72 Susanna Mead Kellogg to Harry Emerson Fosdick, November 26, 1926, Harry Emerson Fosdick
The effect was undiminished even after Fosdick’s broadcasting had taken on its shape as National Vespers decoupled from the actual Sunday morning worship service. Rev. Wallace W. Anderson, a Congregational minister in Manchester, New Hampshire and one of many former students who wrote their erstwhile professor, described the rearranging of household time and space to accommodate a recurrent ritual of listening in. The evening broadcast schedule was more favorable for active ministers; were Fosdick’s Sunday morning service still being broadcast, it is unlikely that Anderson could have written that he had “heard many of your sermons this fall and winter.” But since Fosdick was on the air at a time when he was not himself preaching to a congregation, Anderson and his wife were able to tune in regularly. “Constance and I try to keep Sunday afternoons from five to five-thirty, free from other engagements. The youngsters are taken care of upstairs. It does help to have a time when you can really ‘go to church,’ even if it is by radio.”

If not quite in such vivid terms as Spenser Meeser, Anderson nonetheless describes an intimate living space regularly transformed into a worship space.

This blurring of spatial boundaries, creation of ethereal intimacy, and transformation of living space has been commented upon elsewhere. In an oral history of radio’s first decades, Ray Barfield quotes George Robinson’s recollections of his family’s first radio:

The sounds which came from it were truly magic to a family in Greenville, Mississippi, who thought that Memphis was somewhere on the other side of the globe. We stared at the thing, and at each other, in wonderment as we realized that the voices were actually coming through

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73 Wallace W. Anderson to Harry Emerson Fosdick, February 8, 1934, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4D Box 1 Folder 7.
the air from KMOX in St. Louis and WLW in Cincinnati and WJR in Detroit. I can’t recall what was being broadcast, which is unimportant. The all-engrossing attention was to the fact that we could pull unseen voices out of the air and into the living room from all over the world, or at least as far as the world extended to St. Louis and Detroit.  

This is a picture of the outside world brought inside, and of a family transfixed by the feat. Barfield further describes the impact on private spaces, writing that, “listening habits centered mainly on the family set. In the daily transactions of kinship, grandparents and grandchildren listened together, husbands and wives negotiated program preferences, and children performed household tasks to earn radio listening time.” Yet he also writes of a reverse dynamic in which intimate spaces themselves were opened up to outsiders, as “the owner of the first radio in a small town or in a city neighborhood would open his doors and windows so that a lawn or a sidewalk full of ‘guests’ could hear the sports event, news report, or musical program. In short, radio pulled together blood-related families and created ad-hoc extended families.” Jason Loviglio has discussed this as “an intimate public,” in which “the domestic space of reception becomes more public even as feelings about its intimacy become heightened.”

This amplification of the liberal Protestant message was important, to be sure. A movement seeking to maintain and exercise cultural influence while it engaged in ongoing struggle with fundamentalists and conservatives in its denominational bodies was happy to gain prominent presence via an ascendant medium—a medium which took a common product into living spaces and, through the practices of listening and conversation engendered there, further into public consciousness. W.H.P. Faunce,

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75 Ibid., 39.
President of Brown University, wrote about his own Sunday auditory routine, “I often listen in on Sunday afternoon, and my heart and mind are with you as you address your great audience.” He continued in social gospel lingua franca, “I believe you are delivering the essential gospel and making the Kingdom come in nations you will never visit and years that you will never see; and I rejoice that on the small foundations I was able to lay so many years ago you are building both a physical structure and a spiritual organization that will outlast us both.”

Likewise, the excitement and sense of promise is captured in an article in *Church Monthly*, Park Avenue’s, and then Riverside’s, periodical. The article, “What the Radio Audience Thinks,” consisted of prefatory comments followed by a map of the broadcast coverage (which at that point reached well into the midwest via Chicago’s KYW and KWK in St. Louis, Missouri) and a collection of excerpts from a purportedly random selection of listener letters. The introductory comments assert that, “Letters which arrive week after week from the length and breadth of the land provide tangible and inspiring testimony . . . that the National Religious Service is touching many lives—changing old and outmoded points of view, guiding into paths of confident faith the infirm of body and spirit, awakening deeper religious instincts that have long been dormant.”

The selections are labeled in such a way as to represent diversity of persons—“a fundamentalist,” “a retired school teacher,” “a mill worker,” “a minister”—and breadth of coverage, with excerpts included from places such as Pennsylvania, Ohio, Wisconsin, Virginia, Nova Scotia, and “from the backwoods.”

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77 W.H.P. Faunce to Harry Emerson Fosdick, November 25, 1927, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2A Box 3 Folder 14. Faunce was also one of Fosdick’s predecessors in the Riverside genealogy; he pastored the Fifth Avenue Baptist Church before it moved to Park Avenue. It was also at Fifth Avenue that the Men’s Bible Class took shape and gained prominence, led by Charles Evans Hodge prior to his elevation to the Supreme Court, and later taught by John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

If this expansion of a liberal Protestant voice within public discourse, gaining a diverse hearing within an intimate public, was of vital import, however, the other side of radio-bred intimacy was just as important, if not more so. Bruce Lenthall discusses the fear of radio’s early critics that it represented yet another medium of mass culture, and an exceedingly powerful one at that, which would overpower individuals and leave them with little control in their own lives or in the wider world. He argues, however, that while radio did catch its listeners up in a disorienting modern world, it also helped to orient them to that world. He writes that, “Through radio, listeners remade the frightening public sphere in comfortable and comprehensible private terms.”\(^{79}\) A key way in which this happened was through listeners’ ability to forge a sense of relationship to those radio personalities to whom they were regular auditors. Lenthall argues,

> These ethereal relationships were meaningful to many listeners. Listeners came to draw upon them for advice and support in living their own lives. This was crucial. The ways listeners actually used these relationships in their daily lives reveal just how valuable the arrival of broadcasting proved to be to popular audiences. Listeners discovered sociability and a sense of belonging in their new radio friendships; despite the seemingly one-way nature of radio communication, listeners felt reciprocal exchanges did take place. The listeners who grasped onto these misty relationships were not irrational nuts, but people who sought the resources of a community. Listeners could and did rely on their new webs of personal connections for specialized information and expertise, and for wisdom, life guidance, and help confronting the Depression and the modern world.\(^{80}\)

Hangen discusses this under the heading “parasocial relationships,” in which “some members of the mass media audience have been shown to develop an ‘intimate, friend-like’ relationship with media personas.” This played out in religious broadcasts as speakers often directly addressed the audience, expressing benevolent concern for the

\(^{79}\) Lenthall, *Radio’s America*, 4.
\(^{80}\) Ibid., 73.
small details of the listener’s life, and invited personal connections in a variety of ways.” Further, “the regularity and predictability of religious radio encouraged listeners to tune in again, to trust the speaker, to organize the day or week around the program, and to experience that listening as a participation in a genuine relationship.”81

As Fosdick came to believe, this parasociality was commensurate with his personalist social gospel commitments, engaging the nurture of personality that could help transform society at large. His listeners cultivated precisely this sort of relationship to his radio presence, as illustrated particularly strongly by a listener who lamented his retirement from the air in 1947. A widowed great-grandmother from Villa Ridge, Illinois wrote to inquire about the circumstances surrounding the writing of his 1915 book, The Meaning of Prayer, also including that she had “been helped by you ‘over the air’ for many years, and I am not reconciled to your absence from the radio pulpit.”82 In a similar vein, a Massachusetts listener writes vividly of a multigenerational familial relationship with Fosdick-as-author-and-broadcaster:

You do not know me; I am a member of your listening audience. But we think of you as a friend in our family. It began back in 1924 when an old friend brought my mother a small homemade radio set with earphones. On that Sunday afternoon when we tuned in on the air for the first time, a fine rich voice came through with a stirring message. My mother said, “Who do you suppose we’re listening to?” Then the announcer told us, “National Vespers” Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick. Were we thrilled! Why—We had a copy of “The Meaning of Prayer” which my brother had carried through the War and I had my “Meaning of Faith” which I’d studied in Boarding School, all marked with favorite passages. We were so glad to hear your voice that Sunday. Soon a gathering of neighbors became a custom in our home in Milton every Sunday afternoon to listen to your sermons at 5

o’clock—and we looked forward to those strengthening and comforting talks. I think my mother seldom missed one till her death in 1939. Through the years we’ve read most of your publications and books. And now as I read “On Being Fit to Live With” for my Lenten reading, I feel I must write and thank you for all the comfort and encouragement and pleasure you have given us through the years. 83

Fosdick’s regular presence had become central over the course of two decades to a ritual gathering of family and neighborhood, in which concerns both mutual and personal coalesced and were articulated and addressed.

This facet of the broadcast experience, distinctive as it was, was also in some ways an echo and variation of the author-reader relationship that could manifest through the Protestant utilization of print media. An undated letter from Edwin Poteat offers a parallel to the longterm familial presence described by Grace Thacher, this time with Fosdick-as-author as mediated companion. Poteat wrote, “Last week Mrs. Poteat and I finished ‘The Meaning of Prayer’ as our after breakfast devotions and noted on the last page that the date ‘Dec 16 1917’” [sic]. He explained that, “on that morning in Peking we had finished our first reading of it together. We were fledgling missionaries in the language school then, and here we are a pair of moulting old birds with the nest empty.” He closed by thanking Fosdick for the book: “What a ministry it has had, all about the world for these many years.” 84 Again, Fosdick’s printed words placed him at the nexus of the Poteats’ marital relationship, domestic space, and religious practice.

The notion of genuine relationship arising through mediation was a key element of liberal Protestantism’s presence on the air as seen through National Vespers.

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83 Grace Hall Thacher to Harry Emerson Fosdick, March 16, 1947, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2A Box 10 Folder 8.
84 Edwin McNeill Poteat to Harry Emerson Fosdick, undated Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2B Box 2 Folder 13.
Naturally, there were limits to this; one letter writer from New York City, who apparently
was not a member of Riverside, wrote in January, 1939 to express appreciation for
Fosdick’s on-air sermons and to request an appointment. Fosdick responded, perhaps
with a bit of exaggeration, that he received a hundred thousand letters a year from his
radio audience alone, and asked that the writer would take what Fosdick said over the air
as “personally addressed to” him.\footnote{Schedule of Destroyed Letters, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2A Box 1 Folder 1.} There is some irony here, of course, in that Fosdick
wanted to maintain the sense of a relationship without having to actually invest the time
and energy into this particular one. That was the nature of radio’s amplification of a
speaker’s voice, and of print’s dispersion of the author’s thought; it would be impossible
for a speaker to keep in personal touch with, let alone schedule in-person appointments
with, every member of an audience pool which had grown exponentially. Yet, radio and
print did offer the possibility of cultivating a mass audience—dispersed nationwide, even
globally, while conceiving itself as an “imagined community.” And the essence of the
personalist philosophy informing liberal Protestantism in general and Fosdick’s social
gospel in particular was that such superstructure, however discrete or imagined, had
individuals at its core. In addressing a mass listening audience, faceless and nameless
though most of them were to him, Fosdick conceived of himself as addressing individuals
who were thus in position to incorporate his messages, whether of comfort or of
challenge, into their own lives and contexts.

It is clear from the letters that listeners experienced Fosdick’s radio sermons as
intimately addressed to them both as comfort and as challenge. It would be tempting to
assume that clergy were primarily interested to hear a useable articulation of what they
deemed an intellectually tenable and respectable Protestantism. Certainly this was a
resounding theme among clergy and theologians, magnified particularly among those for
whom Fosdick bore especial resonance as a former professor. Yet the words of thanks
from William Shriver and Rev. Charles Brodhead for messages that spoke to “a lonely
and detached spirit” and to “moods of . . . discouragement”—along with Rev. Wallace
Anderson’s sense of going to church via radio and Colgate University’s William
Lawrence profession that, “For several Sundays I have not found it advisable on account
of the cold to go to church, and so have used my radio”\textsuperscript{86}—demonstrate that the
Protestant intellectuals among Fosdick’s audience also found more intimately personal
concerns met in his broadcasts, as if receiving pastoral care from a clergy mentor. And
Walter Hannah’s thanks to Fosdick for personally helping with his Sunday school class
by way of radio highlights that it was not only clergy and theologians who were
interested in the commingling of Protestant faith and new knowledges. Perhaps every bit
as satisfying to Fosdick were letters such as that from Robert Miller of San Francisco,
who opened his communique by praising Fosdick’s “broad and vibrant views on the
question of religion,” before proclaiming the fact that “I am not a Christian”—a phrase
underlined by either Fosdick or his secretary as being particularly noteworthy. He
insisted that, “of all the radio preachers I listen to, and I listen to quite a few, you are
positively the only one who interests me,” because of a “tolerance” that was “broad . . .
deep, and . . . intelligent,” leaving him at the end of the broadcast “in a contemplative

\textsuperscript{86} William M. Lawrence to Harry Emerson Fosdick, January 19, 1927, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection,
The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2A Box 6 Folder 6.
mood and not irritated or plain mad as I usually am after listening to some of the so called Christian lights of our day.”

A Counselor at Large

As suggested above, for all the letters expressing appreciation for Fosdick’s articulation of liberal theology, many more make it clear that a wide swath of his audience experienced his voice as that of a wise counselor. One folder in the archive contains pages upon pages of brief summarizations of letters which were themselves not preserved, in which people—readers and listeners, often both—asked Fosdick’s advice on vocations, on marital difficulties, on how to handle their or their loved ones’ fears of death. A number of these reflected the intimately personal struggle that was characteristic of much of the movement from conservative to liberal varieties of Protestantism. One such letter came from a listener from Victoria, British Columbia, who wondered “what hope there was for such as he was—hopeless and in despair because of past sin.” To this listener, and to the many others who expressed terror that they had committed the unforgivable sin mentioned in the synoptic gospels, Fosdick offered comfort. Sometimes he recommended the study of a scriptural story such as the parable of the Prodigal Son. Often, he met these fears with an appeal to the breadth of God’s mercy both reasoned and impassioned. Nearly always, he recognized the limitations of the mediated relationship by recommending that his correspondents seek out sympathetic friends, or, in the case of the above writer, “a sympathetic, human-spirited minister nearby to seek counsel with.”

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87 Robert Miller to Harry Emerson Fosdick, January 14, 1934, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4D Box 1 Folder 7.
88 Schedule of Destroyed Letters, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2A Box 1 Folder 1.
One letter from a New England listener encapsulates the confluence of radio-mediated personal intimacy, radio’s ability to help orient people in a disorienting mass society, personalism’s emphasis on the individual’s worth, and the movement from conservative to liberal Protestantism. Shortly before Easter of 1927, Homer Brown of Connecticut found that the third time truly was the charm, finally making good on his prior attempts to write Fosdick and let “one human being on this earth know that they have really helped me, in a way spiritual.” The doubly-mediated nature of the relationship—coming to Brown via radio, moving from Brown to Fosdick on the printed page—made the intimacy not only vivid, but tolerable; print and broadcast worked together to offer Brown access to Fosdick’s personality in a way that was both real and manageable. “It is easier for me to . . . put down on this piece of white paper some of the thoughts that are with me. . . . I should have a dreadful time talking to you face to face as it were, and should probably be so disturbed at your nearness and greatness that the very things I want to tell you would remain forever unsaid.” The Fosdick who was broadcast into Brown’s home felt so visceral as to be intimidating, while the remove of composing words on paper tempered the encounter. Brown goes on to recount a story that would have felt very familiar, not only to Fosdick, but to any number of New England liberal Protestants: a thoroughly religious childhood followed by “the crash,” in which “I decided this religion was all the bunk and I could just as well do without the fuss and

89 Homer Brown to Harry Emerson Fosdick, April 26, 1927, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4D Box 1 Folder 7. Underlining in original.
bother of the whole thing.” He figured that the ministers “told us just a lot of fairy stories and men were pretty dumb to swallow the stuff anyway.”

The next phase of Brown’s story, though, is one of “drift[ing] along.” He engaged Protestantism in a perfunctory manner on an as-needed basis, getting married in a church in order to maintain family peace, and standing with his wife at her church for the baptisms of their two children. He had a happy marriage, beautiful children, a nice home, a good job; life was “lovely.” Yet, he “began to feel . . . that somewhere there was a line over which I was not stepping. A spiritual line over which I could not project my self. It troubled me.” And then further troubles arrived: multiple sicknesses, growing dissatisfaction with his work, a persistent lack of happiness. “I needed some kind of a bolster to my faith in myself. Something to steady me.” He found it unexpectedly on a Sunday morning after a particularly trying week. He just wanted to relax; his wife and son were at church, his daughter was looking at a picture book on the floor, and he turned on the radio, happening upon a broadcast of Fosdick’s morning worship service. “I wasn't thinking very much about God that morning. I hadn’t thought very much about God and his direct relation to me and my problems for a long time. I just felt one more or less vagrant soul didn’t matter.”

Then a turning point came, as he sat in the intimate space of his living room, staring at his young daughter while a voice filtered through the radio. “I got it. Faith in

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90 See Harry Emerson Fosdick, The Living of These Days (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1956), 24-62; Miller, Harry Emerson Fosdick, 3-42; William R. Hutchison, The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992); and the biographical sketches in the first two volumes of Dorrien, The Making of American Liberal Theology. There are multiple variations, of course, of the stories of people moving beyond the boundaries of conservative Protestant orthodoxies, and the clerical focus of these volumes naturally lends itself to a bias toward narratives of challenging traditions from within rather than leaving altogether, which is what Brown seems to have done. Nonetheless, the trope of profound intellectual dissonance with childhood religious upbringing is quite common.
me. Who had I any faith in? If I didn’t have faith, why.” He describes listening carefully to Fosdick’s message, and, “Oddly enough I let myself go. You and God were here in this comfortable little room with me and I was listening. Reverently and yet with a certain feeling of judging you both. Giving you another chance. I was thinking about God. Something I had firmly vowed not to do, a long time ago. You were the medium, and God through you was making an impression.” Again, religion and media may be seen in this as intertwined, as Brown’s own description of Fosdick mediating God’s own presence to him overlays itself upon the occurrence of the radio mediating both Fosdick and God into Brown's living room-ensconced consciousness. Brown goes on to situate himself within the audience he interprets Fosdick as being most concerned about: the “in-between class” of the 1920s, not “the poor dumb things burning themselves out trying to have a good time,” but those in the “middle of the road,” who are “yearning for that something, they don’t know what, that will fit in with the rest of their lives and make it full and round in every degree. . . . The common homely plodders, not famous, not brilliant but poor and the fodder for your captains of industry to play with. What about our salvation?”

Brown here is articulating the personalist gospel that he has heard in Fosdick’s preaching: that the individual matters and must discover that fact even in the face of social forces which would suggest otherwise. He continues the letter by briefly describing, using the language of scientific experiment, an endeavor to study Fosdick and his “method” by attempting “to take you as a pattern and live the next week as I thought you might live it, had you been in my place.” He admits that his own “method” was “crude and elementary,” but that it “seemed the only way to find out if the theories you
were propounding were sound.” Brown felt his experiment to be a success, closing his letter with a sense of assurance that, though he had not yet returned to “the faith of my fathers,” he was positive he would. He hoped it would please Fosdick to know that he had “brought one more soul out of the blackness of the years.” He finishes, “You see you have not converted or prayed over me, but with your unwitting help I have found myself and regained my perspective of a full life.” Such was the power of radio as medium, that it allowed for the transmission, interpretation, and embodiment of personalist rhetoric through the imagined, yet also very real, internalized presence of a broadcast minister whose radio personality functioned to provide pastoral care to a searching soul. Fosdick’s gospel touched that “common homely plodder,” helping him, so he felt, on the road to becoming a better husband, father, and member of society by making his life “full and round in every degree.”

Again, it must also be reinforced that this sense of intimacy and orientation was not limited to broadcast. While radio manifested this phenomenon in particular ways, print media could likewise facilitate a profound sense of connection within a reader. This may be seen in a 1951 letter from a college sophomore which, while outside the timeframe of this project’s larger aims, nonetheless serves as a poignant illustration of print media’s power and of the temporal portability of books in relation to radio broadcasts. Nineteen year old Doris Waugh wrote from The Woman’s College of The University of North Carolina to offer her appreciation. In a period when she had become “severely troubled by the sudden insufficiency of my church and the Bible stories and fairy-tale religion I understood not too long ago,” she happened upon Fosdick’s *As I See Religion* in a bookstore—a book written in the year she was born. Her questioning had
gotten her into trouble in her church, and she “set about forming a sort of credo” of her own. She found elements of interest in H.L. Mencken and C.S. Lewis both, but also found troubling elements in their respective thought. Then she read Fosdick. “Five minutes after that I had stopped and begun staring at a wall. Who was it wrote this book? Was it not so perfectly parallel to whatever sort of creed I had worked out?” Tellingly, she refers to this experience as a “first startled feeling of kinship”—intimate connection facilitated via mediated religion.91

Mediation as Religion

Insofar as media-as-transmission studies have tended to focus on the technologies, economics, or politics of creating media space and filling it with messages, or even simply on analyzing what those messages were, and insofar as media-as-ritual studies have tended to emphasize the practices of meaning-making among audiences, practices of mediation as an active part of the speaker’s own religious life have been underexamined. Yet, or Fosdick it is clear that the production end of the media equation was every bit the religious experience that it was for many of those who consumed his messages. This is particularly evident in relation to his radio broadcasts, because the new medium spurred his conscious reflection on the processes involved in creating its products. Additionally, the newness created a sense of intrigue among listeners, at least two of whom published pieces meant to illuminate the setting and circumstances of Fosdick’s preaching; these offer some third person evidence of how he engaged the process. Protestant creation of print media, on the other hand, was already well established in the 1920s and 1930s, and

91 Doris Waugh to Harry Emerson Fosdick, May 14, 1951, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2B Box 1 Folder 10. As a side note, Doris Waugh went on to publish novels under her married name, Doris Betts.
Fosdick did not leave much in terms of reflecting on the process of writing per se. What he did write about, however, was the nature of crafting sermons. Examining how Fosdick approached this task, along with how he undertook his radio broadcasts, allows an understanding of how mediation itself served as the realm of religious act for Fosdick. In crafting, delivering, broadcasting, and collecting sermons, Fosdick saw himself as vitally engaged with his audiences, able to project his social gospel personalism via commodities that allowed for the bolstering of audience members’ own personalities and subsequent action in the social world.

*The Homiletic Task*

“Only the preacher proceeds still upon the idea that folk come to church desperately anxious to discover what happened to the Jebusites.”92 Thus did Fosdick famously and piquantly dismiss the offerings of so many preachers who insisted on expository sermons, starting with a biblical text and poking about as if engaged in the dissection of a biological specimen, providing a historical explanation and elucidation of the text’s internal meanings before attempting some bridge to applications for contemporary living. For Fosdick, the purpose of a sermon was deeply intertwined with the psychology of the listener: “Every sermon should have for its main business the solving of some problem—a vital, important problem, puzzling minds, burdening consciences, distracting lives.”93 It is perhaps suggestive of Fosdick’s position as a modernist within a milieu of mass culture that he used the purveyors of that culture to scold recalcitrant expository preachers, arguing that, “The advertisers of any goods, from

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92 Fosdick, “What is the Matter with Preaching?” *Harpers Magazine*, July 1928, 135. That Fosdick draws upon many of the core ideas, and even phrases, of this article in his 1956 *The Living of These Days* (see esp. pp. 92-101) attests to its status as the apotheosis of his thought on the topic of preaching.

93 Ibid., 134.
a five-foot shelf of classic books to the latest life insurance policy, plunge as directly as possible after contemporary wants, felt needs, actual interests and concerns.”

This central directive of using a sermon to solve an existential problem, a mode of preaching that he dubs “the project method,” also negated what Fosdick saw as the modernist preacher’s similarly hollowed-out alternative to the expository homiletics: the topical sermon, in which the preacher propounded, lecture-style, upon some contemporary subject of note. The danger here, Fosdick noted, was that, “Instead of starting with a text, [ministers] start with their own ideas on some subject of their choice, but their ideas on that subject may be much farther away from the vital interests of the people than a great text from the Bible.” This he saw as a recipe, not only for a dissatisfied audience, but for clergy burnout and alienation as the minister manifests and reinforces an increasing divide from congregation. Rather, just as modern pedagogy began with the child and adapted what was to be learned to the learner, so good preaching needed to start with the listener. “All of this is good sense and good psychology. Everybody else is using it from first-class teachers to first-class advertisers.” The preacher’s task was thus contextual, demanding a knowledge and prioritization of the interests of the individuals within the congregation (and, by extension in Fosdick’s case, listening and reading audiences). His aim was to stir a response: “This, I take it, is the final test of a sermon’s worth: how many individuals wish to see the preacher alone?”

Fosdick’s project method of preaching involved the preacher’s maintenance of a sense of mutuality with an audience, which entailed engaging the same social and

94 Ibid., 135.
95 Ibid., 136.
96 Ibid., 136.
97 Ibid., 141.
material world within which auditors and readers were formed and in which their particular concerns were shaped. He contended that this would make “a sermon a co-operative enterprise between the preacher and his congregation.” Preparing a sermon, then, was not only prefatory to the moment of delivery. It was a religious action that drew on the scripture, the world at large, and the relationships that the preacher had already developed with his audience, culminating in a product that both projected and reinforced those relationships. It was in this relational matrix, enlarged through the processes of mediation, that audiences would not only find their existential questions articulated and addressed, but would then be challenged and empowered to become shapers of the social world.

Collecting his sermons into books provided Fosdick further engagement with his audiences, though he did not immediately recognize this. Indeed, the introduction to his first collection of sermons evinces a reluctance to remove them from the immediacy of their delivery: Fosdick confesses misgivings because printed sermons don’t reproduce the “intimate, conversational message from soul to soul.” The fact that he dedicated the volume both to the congregation of Riverside Church and to the listeners of National Vespers indicates that he prioritized the preaching moment itself as the locus of intersection between human and divine personalities; nonetheless, that he proceeded to collect four more volumes of sermons after the first, in addition to his regular pieces in the popular press, demonstrates that he came to find real value in them as a means of conveying his religious message in a format which could be visited and revisited over the

98 Ibid., 137.
course of time. This was, of course, already a practice recognized as meaningful by every member of his audiences who had requested a copy of a sermon, and Fosdick himself had realized that carefully chosen, written copies of sermons, sent to those who wrote in with vexing personal problems, could serve at least as a reflection of intimate connection. Print mediation thus really could function as an extension of the pastoral role.

*The Broadcast Moment*

Radio bore its own dynamics in Fosdick’s religious life. For example, if radio spurred listeners to plot their schedules around rituals of listening, so did the live broadcast program entail the ritualization of the speaker’s time. As Fosdick negotiated the plans for National Vespers with NBC, he also needed to negotiate with Park Avenue’s administrative bodies for the use of his time. He wrote to Trustee James C. Colgate, “It does involve a very heavy Sunday for me the consequence of which will be that I shall have to give up active personal responsibility for the evening service, so that my acceptance of this invitation becomes a matter for the Trustees and the Deacons to take under their review.”\(^{100}\) At one level, this demonstrates that Fosdick’s radio broadcasting was, to some degree, a joint venture with his congregation, though his congregants were not themselves on the air. Perhaps more simply, this indicates that broadcasting sermons, just like leading Sunday morning worship services, became a regular appointment that was a part of the routine of liberal Protestantism as Fosdick lived it.

The sense of mediated relationship made possible by radio was also a reality for Fosdick as it was for his listeners. In a brief reflection that Fosdick wrote in April,
1954\textsuperscript{101}—and which may have been intended for publication in a newspaper, other periodical, or as fodder for his autobiography, which was published in 1956; the material is resonant with, but not identical, to that in his book—Fosdick looks back on the broadcasting experience and what it meant for him. This must be viewed with some tentativeness because it was written far in retrospect, but it remains an interesting record of his recollections and provides some insight into how Fosdick experienced radio broadcasting as religious activity. Fosdick writes that he initially viewed religious broadcasting with skepticism, which is at least plausible in view of his lack of initiative and his earlier descriptions of himself to correspondents as “conservative in practical matters.” He describes his first impression of a microphone as being a “strange, uninspiring contrivance.” But the microphone itself was to become “almost as stirring as a great congregation,” thanks to “the letters that poured in—grateful, intimate, presenting vital personal and domestic problems.” Radio, he found, “could be a medium of vital personal communication.” While the distance covered by the broadcasts was an initial thrill, he asserts that this soon became secondary. “It was rather the intimacy of radio, bringing its message directly to individuals in their family circles, that mattered most. Broadcasting became personal counseling, and the personal results were often startling in transformed and reinvigorated lives.”

There are some artifacts contemporary to Fosdick’s broadcasting years that provide insight into Fosdick’s views on and experience of broadcasting consistent with these later reflections. The same issue of Park Avenue’s \textit{Church Monthly} that published the excerpts from listener letters included a behind the scenes article on Fosdick’s

\textsuperscript{101} Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 3C Box 2 Folder 5.
broadcasting by church member E. Benedict Keeler. She notes the unknowns on both sides of the broadcast equation. On the side of the audience, “We sit in our homes and wonder what the speaker looks like, how the studio is furnished, if those who take part think of us in our homes, and if the ministers act as they would if they had a visible audience before them.” But she posits questions from the other side, as well, as “those in the studio wonder if the radio is ‘tuned in’ or silent, if a relentless hand is reaching out to ‘tune out’ after listening in for a few moments, if the hearer is being reached at a time when some great sorrow, some deep problem, lies heavy upon the heart and the message will be of real help.”

She describes a visit to the studio for the broadcast, at which she finds no extraneous people other than those needed for the task at hand. The room has a high ceiling, a luxurious rug, a bearing of grandeur—but also, in her interpretation, the peacefulness of “a temple.” As the musicians rehearse, Fosdick enters and stands looking out the window. Keeler imagines him visualizing the denizens of the apartments, homes, and hospitals, asking God for words that will provide inspiration to those in times of need. As the broadcast begins, with a sense of tenseness met by the reverence projected by Fosdick, Keeler describes his delivery, paying particular attention to his hands. “It is interesting to note that so remarkably does Dr. Fosdick visualize the radio audience that his gestures and his personality are just as vivid as though he could see the vast multitude grouped in one place.”

The preacher, in other words, is at his preaching, mediating his message via the vessel of his personality to those who, since not within the walls of the studio, must be conjured within the sanctuary of his imagination.

103 Ibid., 176.
In a similar vein, Laura Jane Hawley published an article in *Pictorial Review* meant to introduce readers to Fosdick and Riverside both. Hawley indicates that she had not met Fosdick prior to her visit, and that she had been a regular listener for five years while living in various regions of the country. Her stated purpose is to provide insight for people such as herself—regular listeners who have long wondered about Fosdick and Riverside. Her listening experience reflects the development of radio as a medium. “At first I listened over a little crystal set; later with two tubes and a headpiece that frequently was taken apart so that two might listen. Often the sermon was overheard through notes of jazz or political harangue. I learned to pick up Dr. Fosdick’s voice and disregard those of several others coming simultaneously.” This description itself is suggestive, positing Fosdick as a steadying influence amid the chaotic maelstrom of cultural instability reflected in jazz music and political discourse (not to mention the technological instability of airwave interference). Her interpretation of the effects of listening to the services on the radio reflects much of what has already been discussed in terms of the connections that a listener forges to a speaker. “There is something thrilling in mind communicating with mind with none of the distractions of physical appearance,” because “The ear becomes attuned to a voice. It is a very intimate experience that can rarely, if ever, be duplicated in any church.” While Fosdick probably would have quibbled with this last statement, it is interesting to note that, for Hawley, the stripping away of physicality heightened the broadcast effect of relating speaker to hearer. Yet, at the same time, the physicality of her visit to the studio contributed a new element to her subsequent listening. In an assessment echoing Keeler’s, she adds that, “I could add to

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the voice on the radio his dynamic gestures and earnest face.” Clearly, Fosdick had learned to move beyond his initial assessment of the microphone as an “uninspiring contrivance.”

The intimacy in broadcasting which Fosdick reflected on at the end of his career was clearly experienced as real among those who wrote letters to him, often so impassioned, full of gratitude, questions, and descriptions of personal circumstances extraordinarily mundane or devastatingly heartbreaking. But the intimacy was real on his side, as well, as the broadcast audience sending him fragments of their own personal lives became a supplement to, if yet distinct from (though at times overlapping) his weekly, physical congregation. His letters in response to listeners, in which he offered his counsel or even noted the limitations of pastoral care under the circumstances, may be seen as a manifestation of this intimacy on his end, the living out of his religious vocation in conjunction with unmet and unseen others. This shouldn’t be pressed too far, for it is true that the volume of mail was such that Fosdick’s secretaries responded to much of it, particularly those letters which were primarily aimed at asking for copies of sermons or suggestions for reading materials. Yet even this is significant, for if religion entails processes of mediation that connect people to one another, then Fosdick’s radio broadcasting may be seen as residing at a nexus which brought listeners into contact not only with Fosdick, but also into Fosdick’s own relationship to his secretaries, Dorothy Noyes and Margaret Renton, who became familiar enough with his person, thought, and writings that they could ably handle much of his correspondence.

One more element to consider in the phenomenon of radio-mediated, letter-manifest intimacy between Fosdick and his listeners is the reciprocity that could
develop—the very sense of mutuality of which he had written in “What’s the Matter With Preaching?” Often, letter writers felt that Fosdick had personally given them something via his broadcasts, and their letters were meant to return something, even if only words of thanks. The occasional listener sent a little money as a means of demonstrating their gratitude, but because Fosdick donated his time and his program was on sustaining time, this meant little to him beyond its symbolism. What he received as a particular gift, however, was stories. For instance, as World War II was unfolding overseas and Fosdick used his physical and radio pulpits to voice the convictions of Christian pacifism, a writer from Benton Harbor, MI, wrote to hail one sermon as “a masterpiece.”¹⁰⁵ He wrote of his experience during the Great War, when he had spoken out forcefully against war but nonetheless enlisted and found himself in France. He writes that, “Before we went to the trenches we were told to get our men together and develop in them a feeling of hatred for the German people.” But he told the men under his command that they did not need to hate individual Germans for being German. In contrast to this, he writes about men who’d already taken their turn on the front lines being sent back up front as prisoners after going AWOL. One officer directed his battalion adjutant to deal severely with these men, by riding in the rear on long marches after attacks, ready to shoot any man who dropped out. This story, like a number of others from letter writers, was marked off for inclusion in a future sermon. Thus, exchanges of letters between Fosdick and his listeners became a means of reflexivity, a manifestation of intimacy in which Fosdick’s preaching reached deep spots in listeners’ psyches, and in which those listeners provided further stories to inform Fosdick’s subsequent preaching. That subsequent preaching then

¹⁰⁵ H.O. Felten to Harry Emerson Fosdick, October 8, 1939, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2A Box 3 Folder 15.
allowed Fosdick to mediate, not only his own personality, but also the personalities of others who could serve as examples of interior growth or of spiritually engaged action in the social world.

A final element of Fosdick’s thought on the place of radio within his religious experience and vocation bears mentioning. In 1930, he exchanged several letters with S. Parkes Cadman, pastor of Brooklyn’s Central Congregational Church and popular speaker on the National Radio Pulpit. Cadman wrote to Fosdick in confidence “as my colleague in Radio work,” asking for Fosdick’s opinion on whether it made sense for him to resign his pulpit at Central in order to focus full-time on his radio ministry. Fosdick agreed that both tasks were too much for one man, and suggested that Cadman would need to have an associate pastor were he to continue in both positions. He continued,

Aside from this one consideration I should suppose that all the arguments were in favor of your retaining the pulpit of the church. Personally, I should be afraid of losing the kind of independence that comes to one in his radio work because he can think of himself as really having a settled habitation in the economy of the Christian church proper, where he belongs, and from which he draws his native strength. I have felt so strongly about this matter that not only would I under no circumstances give up a pulpit for the sake of a radio ministry, but I have even stoutly refused all financial compensation for radio work in order that I might be entirely independent of any reliance upon the National Broadcasting Company or a Broadcasting Committee.106

For Fosdick, then, the relationships developed over the air were separate from the more fully embodied relationships developed through his congregational setting, which remained primary. Yet, those congregational relationships not only provided him strength and energy for his radio-based relationships, they also gave fuller resonance to them.

106 Harry Emerson Fosdick to S. Parkes Cadman, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2A Box 2 Folder 4.
Mediating Solace in a Troubled Age

In 1938, Helen Shirk of Muncie, Indiana, echoing Homer Brown’s sense of trepidation, overcame five years’ worth of hesitance and “screw[ed] up my courage to the point of writing to” Fosdick. 107 The letter conveyed her overwhelming gratitude “for all the help and comfort you have given us.” Shirk and her family suffered a great deal in the Depression, though she was quick to point out that her troubles were “no greater than those gallantly faced by thousands of families in these bewildering times.” Her husband’s business failed at the start of the Depression, and their two children had to withdraw from their courses of study at Vassar and Harvard. Her parents lost all of their income and moved in, and in short order began to suffer physical ailments. The family “had a huge house and no servants,” and soon found themselves struggling with “bewilderment and bitterness . . . hardness and cynicism.”

It was in the midst of this difficult period that a friend sent one of Fosdick’s books, which Shirk read “desperately, avidly.” She was cognizant of a need for help, but was not finding it in her routines of church and prayer; “I was all wrong inside.” Although skeptical, she decided to follow Fosdick’s counsel of quiet meditation and discovered, gradually, that her “hour of quiet every morning is more important than food or sleep or anything—As William James said, ‘A new zest added itself like a gift to life.’” Having addressed her interior problems, Shirk then discovered that “good things are contagious as well as bad ones!” She describes her family as “still poor,” but finds that unimportant. Her husband was employed, and took Fosdick’s books with him on his business travels; her daughter was married, and had her own copies of Fosdick’s books,

107 Helen Shirk to Harry Emerson Fosdick, June 13, 1938, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4D Box 1 Folder 7.
which she read “constantly;” and her son returned to Harvard on scholarship and heard Fosdick speak in Cambridge. In addition to the books, which provided them with tangible connections to Fosdick’s spiritual wisdom, they gathered together weekly to listen to his broadcasts, which gave them “strength and courage” and “Enough to keep us going for another week.” A marginal note on the letter, written by Fosdick or one of his secretaries, indicates the resonance he found in it: “Keep permanently.”

Helen Shirk and her family thus offer a fitting summation to the themes of this chapter, illustrating the contours of Fosdick’s message in mediation and reception. Through their participation in a middle class consumer culture which placed significance on the acquisition of material goods, they structured rituals of engagement around those objects, which mediated to them Fosdick’s own personality. In the midst of a large scale economic crisis which caused them financial hardships and a diminished sense of their classed well being, they responded to a message of interiority—a message that was heightened through regular encounters in multiple modes, and which reinforced for them the importance of attention to personality which lay at the heart of Fosdick’s social gospel articulation. Indeed, Helen Shirk’s attention to the task of nurturing and sustaining her own personality through regular quiet meditation functioned as a salve which eventuated in the healing and strengthening of her family. As received by the Shirk family in Muncie, Indiana, Fosdick’s message did not stimulate a radical restructuring of social systems—but it did provide family members with means of enduring a troubled era and finding greater confidence in their ability to navigate their social world.
CHAPTER 4

MESSAGES IN STONE AND STEEL: THE RIVERSIDE CHURCH AND THE RELIGIOUS USE OF SPACE

Without doubt, Dr. Fosdick is writing a memorable chapter in the story of preaching in this country. It is well for his contemporaries to be aware of the significance of the adventure upon which he has embarked. . . . The new church building is the symbol of this adventure, but it is more than symbolic. It is an essential part of it.

Editorial, The Christian Century

On me nor Priest nor Presbyterian nor Pope,/ Bishop nor Dean may stamp a party name;/ But Jesus, with his largely human scope,/ The service of my human life may claim./ Let prideful priests do battle about creeds,/ The church is mine that does most Christlike deeds.

Riverside Church bulletin cover

Introduction

On November 20, 1927, the Park Avenue Baptist Church laid the cornerstone for their new edifice at the intersection of Riverside Drive and 122nd Street in the Morningside Heights neighborhood of New York City. It was one step in a long process that had begun with the purchase of the property by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. in May 1925, and would culminate with the congregation occupying the site several years later. There was one significant construction delay when, just before Christmas in 1928, the structure burst into a massive blaze that Fosdick biographer Robert Moats Miller reports was a five alarm fire, causing more than $1.7 million in damage.

1 “Dr. Fosdick Accepts the Challenge,” The Christian Century, October 15, 1930, 1239.
2 Riverside Church bulletin cover, October 5, 1930, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4A Box 3 Folder 1. This was for the first official worship service held in the church sanctuary. The text was superimposed over an image of the church building.
that some 100,000 viewed the spectacle “on both sides of the Hudson.” Otherwise, construction moved quickly. The congregation held its first worship service in the new building on October 5, 1930, and formally dedicated the space on February 8, 1931. The erection of this grand Protestant cathedral thus occurred within the context of wider crisis: between the laying of the church’s cornerstone and its dedicatory services, the nation endured a traumatic stock market crash and entry into the economic malaise of the Great Depression.

Just days after the October 5 service, The Christian Century published an article about the new venture. The author expressed disappointment in the architecture, bemoaning that a “superb location” and unknown but undoubtedly “unlimited resources at command” resulted in a structure that “seems to strike no new note. Everything that it seems to say has been said before, and in many respects better.” For all that, however, the author deems the church’s project to be “one of the most fateful, [and] one of the most daring, ever undertaken by a Protestant congregation.” The reason: “It is an attempt to bring the gospel in impressive and convincing way [sic] to those who have dismissed it as of no importance.” The writer saw this supercilious attitude as an especially urban condition. “That multiplied thousands of city dwellers have so dismissed [the gospel] is depressingly clear. . . . [M]ultitudes have come to the conclusion that the church, and its

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4 “Night Fire Sweeps Riverside Church as 100,000 Look On,” New York Times, December 22, 1928. Interestingly, a subtitle described the church as a “$4,000,000 Edifice Being Built by Rockefeller’s Congregation for Dr. Fosdick.”

5 There were no fewer than five dedicatory events for the building: congregational worship on February 8, 1931; a service that afternoon which included representatives from various community institutions; an interdenominational dedication service on Wednesday, February 11, 1931; a Church Family Night with reception and social gathering on Friday, February 13, 1931, to which those holding tickets for Sunday services were invited; and a service of Dedication of the Church to Childhood and Youth on Sunday, February 15, 1931. Additionally, the March 1931 issue of The Church Monthly indicates that there was an evening service on February 20, 1931 that included one thousand artisans, craftsmen, and laborers who had helped to build the church.
message, are extraneous to the affairs of modern life. . . . Particularly in our cities has this process of seepage gained distressing proportions.\textsuperscript{6}

Cities had long been perceived as ambivalent sites by white American Protestant churches, their concentrations of people—particularly those who were racially and religiously other—and attendant poverty and vices offering both the dangers of sensual temptation and the attraction of spiritual purpose in efforts at relief and reform. But the \textit{Christian Century} author was concerned with another hazard altogether: the academy, of which Riverside’s neighbor, Columbia University, was a prime example, and among which “the church and its gospel has for a generation been losing caste.” Yet, this very danger also invited valor, and the writer underscored both by asserting that, “Dr. Fosdick and his congregation have shown courage enough to go to the most difficult spot in the most difficult city in the world.”\textsuperscript{7}

The \textit{Century} article is suggestive of a number of focal points that will comprise the present chapter. The first is the relation of the church and the city, entities that are mutually intertwined, sometimes comfortably and sometimes uncomfortably. I will offer a brief summation of points relating to white American Protestant approaches to cities in general, and then an exploration of the particularities of Riverside’s placement within its own locale of Morningside Heights. Secondly, the \textit{Century} author’s disappointment with Riverside’s architecture highlights that aesthetics holds meaning. As Jean Halgren Kilde has argued, “Religious space is dynamic space. Religious spaces house religious ritual, of course, but they do far more than simply provide the setting within which ritual takes place. They contribute in important ways to the very meaning of ritual practices and to

\textsuperscript{6} “Dr. Fosdick Accepts the Challenge,” 1239.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 1240.
the shape and content of religious systems themselves.”\(^8\) Thus, in addition to describing Riverside’s geographic and neighborhood emplacement, I will also analyze the physical space of the building itself, parsing its symbolic meanings.

Further, in suggesting that the church has the potential to contribute to “the cause of religion in America” and “is to be a great testing ground for modern evangelical Christianity,”\(^9\) the *Century* article conveys that the passive construction of “holding” meaning must also be paired with an active verb such as “projecting,” for Riverside’s architecture was meant to communicate rather than simply to serve as a repository. Indeed, a purely passive role is an impossibility, for buildings do not exist in vacuums but rather help to shape, and are shaped by, people who utilize and experience them in multiple ways; as Lindsay Jones contends, “Religious buildings arise as human creations, but they persist as transforming, life-altering environments. They are at once expressions of and sources of religious experience.”\(^10\) They are, in other words, not neutral entities but are created with particular aims in mind and are experienced in ways that may or may not be compatible with initial intentions. In Riverside’s case, the metaphor of broadcasting is particularly apt here. The building was planned and constructed during the very years in which Fosdick was harnessing the new and burgeoning medium of radio to draw ever farther audiences within range of his voice. The Riverside Church structure itself was likewise a medium through which the liberal Protestantism of Fosdick and the congregation that he represented was communicated. The church site and architecture

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9 “Dr. Fosdick Accepts the Challenge,” 1240.
were meant to broadcast particular sets of religious meanings and values, especially as they related to Fosdick’s conception of religion as irreducibly personal and social and to liberal Protestantism’s place within the American cultural landscape.

In his masterful study of the social and cultural history of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., Thomas Tweed asserts that “there are ten factors to consider in the interpretation of a religious site and the rituals conducted there: the building’s name, location, appearance, context, relations, representations, makers, donors, users, and functions.”11 While I do not intend to impose this on the remainder of the chapter in checklist format, Tweed’s factors, several of which have already been hinted at above, do figure into my analysis of Riverside. In addition to the areas of examination already limned, I will weave into my analysis the involvement of primary donor John D. Rockefeller, Jr., for his involvement highlights what I see as an irony of the social gospel movement, namely its reliance on capital and its attendant class blind spots. Here again, broadcasting furnishes a touchpoint: just as Rockefeller played a role in underwriting Fosdick’s weekly radio program, in essence contributing to a liberal Protestant architecture of the airwaves, he was likewise a central figure in the choice of site and architectural design by which Riverside would broadcast its version of Protestantism into New York and beyond. Because its planning and completion straddled the onset of the Great Depression, and because its planners intended to broadcast it as such both locally and nationally, the Riverside endeavor offers a useful snapshot of the era’s social gospel-inflected liberal Protestantism. It reflects a number of Protestant architectural and institutional expressions and practices of its time, offering themes of

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centralization and professionalization, domesticity and the urban landscape, personal spirituality and social outreach, and the congregation’s simultaneous positioning as conservative and as the forward-looking apotheosis of true Protestantism.

**Protestants and the American City: Religion and Spatial Engagement**

Underlying this chapter is the contention that religion takes place in physical space, and that, as it does so, it imbues that space with meaning, or with sets of meanings. Religion and space, that is, exist in reciprocal relationship. An important work in the study of religion and spatial engagement is Robert Orsi’s *The Madonna of 115th Street*, which provides an interesting entry point as Orsi sketches important themes related to the embodiment of religion within urban settings. Orsi provides a historical analysis of the annual *festa* in Italian Harlem in honor of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel—the titular Madonna—situating the celebration squarely within the intersections of home, neighborhood, and city. His central contention is that the religion of the Italian Catholics in Harlem from the latter part of the nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth century is not a discrete, compartmentalized subject of study; rather, it makes no sense unless seen within the larger contexts of neighborhood lives. Fundamental to his exposition is the assertion that celebrations such as the *festa* complicate settled notions of public and private domains: the *festa* sacralizes the labors of the home by bringing them into the church; in scapulars and pamphlets, it sends the values of the church into the home in tactile form; the annual event, supported by—but not contained by—the church enacts the values of home, neighborhood, and church publicly in the streets. The

veneration of an Italian Madonna claimed and reconstituted an American Italian identity in the streets of Harlem, and it did so in front of Germans and Irish, as well as African Americans, some of whom would stop in the church to offer prayers. The germane point here is this: religion is not easily containable within the realm of the head, but is engaged by whole bodies that join together and move apart in learned and created practices—and that these practicing, religious bodies of necessity take up, move through, and interact with physical space that may be already and otherwise populated and interpreted. This presence in and movement through space is always an assertion and interpretation of the self and of the self in relation—to other people, both real and imagined, and to the divine.

Space is not static, but is dynamic, changing over time. One of the predominant trajectories of change within American space over much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was that of urbanization. This had profound implications for religious expression, as examined helpfully by Orsi in his introduction to *Gods of the City*.<sup>13</sup> Three elements of urban change might be emphasized here. The first is industrialization, with its attendant technological changes and the populational shifts that followed. Industry itself underwent expansion and technological transformation, drawing legions of laborers into the cities to work—among them many of the millions of immigrants who streamed into the country during the Gilded Age. In this respect, the city increasingly became home to the foreign Other, whose customs, language, and religious practices and patterns of belonging added new layers of diversity. This worked in tandem with shifts in transportation, with further development of roads, boats, and railways; throughout the nineteenth century, cities were intentionally developed according to symmetrical grid

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patterns that facilitated the flow of goods and labor. This restructuring of physical space was partnered with a restructuring of social space, as the new urban middle class found that they could move outside of, but still have easy access to, the city centers and their commerce. This functioned as a mapping of social class, as the laboring classes and poor people remained to both live and work in the realm of labor and competition. Finally, at least through the 1890s, the development of street paving, water supply, and sewage disposal could not keep up with the continually growing population density of the industrial city. Cities were increasingly characterized, particularly by those who lived outside of them and who wielded greater cultural and economic capital, as foreign, filthy, and dangerous.

The changes within space arising from the dynamics of urbanization had definite, and somewhat contradictory, effects within Protestantism. Fear was one religious response. This can be seen clearly in the case of Josiah Strong, an early organizer within the social gospel movement. In his 1885 book, *Our Country*, Strong stridently sought to alert Anglo-Saxon Protestants that they resided in a crisis moment, a pivot point upon which the fate of the nation, and even of the world, might turn. He sought to rally the faithful to action in response to several key dangers facing the nation, including “Romanism,” immigration, temperance, and the general barbarism of the western frontier. Another of his key dangers: cities, in which most of the other dangers (with the lone exception of Mormonism) were concentrated. Just eight years later, Strong magnified this sense that the city was the greatest problem facing evangelical Christianity

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and the nation as a whole.\textsuperscript{15} Indeed, much of the initial social gospel message and activism grew in response to the dislocation of Protestantism from the cultural center within the context of urbanization, as well as to the very real problems of exploitation and degradation arising within industrial capitalism.

A simultaneous response—and one that at first appears paradoxical, but is perhaps simply the flip side of the fear—might be construed as purpose. Orsi denotes it as desire, describing the city as “the necessary mirror of American civilization . . . [where] fundamental categories of American reality—whiteness, heterosexuality, domestic virtue, feminine purity, middle-class respectability—were constituted in opposition to what was said to exist [there].” As such, he argues, the city became “the domain of primitive vitality and the really real,” where, “for all the many things that separate the sensualist from the settlement house worker, the morally degraded from the morally impassioned, both are gripped by the particular desire aroused by and for the city as the space of the alien other, and for an encounter with the real or the primitive that the circumstances of their respectability occluded.”\textsuperscript{16} It was the very otherness and danger of the city around which the social gospel movement coalesced. The threat to the nation’s unity and moral fiber presented a realm for theory and action, a physical and social world into which the kingdom of God might be made manifest. Contiguous with this impulse was the institutional church movement, in which some urban congregations sought to carry out


\textsuperscript{16} Orsi, “Crossing the City Line,” 5, 8-10.
their religious mission (and allay the spiritual and social danger) by offering a wide array of programs to the people of their neighborhoods to address physical and social needs that were seen to impact spiritual well-being.

This was an era, too, of interdenominational cooperation, as many Protestants—especially those moderates and liberals who comprised the Protestant establishment—felt that denominationalism was itself sapping the Church’s vitality, and that pulling together to uplift the city would be good both for city and for Church. Of course, other Protestants also responded to the changes in physical and social space brought by urbanization. For instance, Diane Winston writes of the Salvation Army’s arrival in New York in 1880, which saw them try to reconceptualize the city as a church without walls, realizing the kingdom of God in urban space through theatrical evangelization in the “cathedral of the open air.” Their ongoing urban presence likewise led to some analysis of harmful social conditions that eventuated in a sizable social service delivery network. Other conservative Protestants, however, responded by retreating into “purely spiritual” evangelization, considering any efforts at social reform a diversion from the mission of saving souls. For its part, Riverside Church, though it did not specifically apply the label to itself, might be considered in character an institutional church, as it aimed to make itself physically available to various community groups and constitutive of ministries and activities—in addition to worship and other typical church activities—that arose organically as need and interest were expressed.

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Riverside on the Heights: Place as Profession

The Riverside Church represented the evolution in a new space of the Park Avenue Baptist Church, which itself had been completed and dedicated for service only in 1922. The sanctuary on Park Avenue seated eight hundred, and the church was situated in a residential neighborhood that represented a stark concentration of wealth. When John D. Rockefeller, Jr., acting as head of the church’s Search Committee, approached Fosdick about becoming the pastor, the building’s spatial context was one of the reasons for Fosdick’s initial refusal. As Fosdick recalls in his autobiography, he felt that, “if I accepted the pastorate there, I would be justifiably accused of surrendering a real opportunity for public influence to become private chaplain to a small group of financially privileged people.”19 Among the preconditions Fosdick set for the possibility of accepting the pastorate was that the congregation would move again, this time to a space which would seem more symbolically fit, that is, situated within a pluralistic milieu of culture and learning rather than in a setting of opulent residences which would overburden the church with the suggestive connotation of its subservience to wealth. The reasoning for the ultimate choice of location, which Fosdick somewhat hesitantly recollects, is telling: “The major reason, I suspect, was the fact that already so many educational and religious institutions had begun moving to the Heights that it was clearly going to be one of the foremost cultural centers in the nation, and no adequate Protestant parish church was there to minister to the countless thousands who were being drawn to

the neighborhood by its unique opportunities.”20 While Fosdick did insist on the move to Morningside Heights as a precondition for accepting Park Avenue’s offer, his tone here is reflective of the fact that the idea was not unique to him. Miller documents that, by the fall of 1924, Rockefeller himself had determined that, should Fosdick ultimately decline the Park Avenue pulpit, he would personally purchase a site and build a church in Morningside Heights for Fosdick.21 The space was interpreted as constellating a number of cultural factors, beyond mere economic capital, which could heighten the church’s own prestige and help to broadcast its message; it offered tremendous religious potential. A 1929 article in Park Avenue’s *The Church Monthly* sought to orient parishioners to the neighborhood they were preparing to congregationally inhabit, offering synopses of each institutional neighbor. “The Riverside Church . . . is in an unusual position,” the *Monthly* claimed. “It stands in a community dedicated on a vast scale to education in many aspects—dedicated to the important work of extending the intellectual horizon of men and women from all parts of the globe, preparing them for leadership, for effective participation in the spiritual and material life of the world.”22

The particularities of that distinct place, the Morningside Heights neighborhood, are cataloged and interpreted in Andrew Dolkart’s excellent architectural and

20 Ibid., 188.
21 Robert Moats Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 159-160. Miller also notes that Harry Edmonds, the director of the Rockefeller-created International House for foreign students studying on Morningside Heights, approached Fosdick that October with the idea of creating a liberal Protestant cathedral on Riverside Drive. Further, a similar idea had occurred to Ivy Lee, the public relations expert behind the nationwide dissemination of Fosdick’s 1922 sermon, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” and thus a key figure in the modernist-fundamentalist controversies that eventuated in Fosdick’s departure from his preaching post at First Presbyterian Church. In a document archived at Union Theological Seminary—undated, but with contextual clues suggesting it was compiled shortly after Fosdick accepted the Park Avenue pastorate—Lee summarizes ideas he began drawing up in the fall of 1924 “for organizing, financing and building a church for Dr. Fosdick . . . to be erected on Columbia Heights [sic].” Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4A Box 1 Folder 1.
developmental history of the neighborhood. Dolkart’s history tells a story of struggle, rapid institutional development, and the growth of the nation’s first neighborhood of middle-class apartments. Prior to 1887, there had been little residential development in Morningside Heights, a neighborhood located on a plateau. The community is situated on the upper west side of Manhattan, covering the area between 110th and 125th Streets, bounded on the west by Riverside Drive and the Hudson River and on the east by Morningside Drive and the Morningside Cliffs. In the late nineteenth century, the development of elevated train lines started a south-to-north wave of development on Manhattan as its neighborhoods were connected to the city center; Morningside Heights’ topographic location, however, left it out, as the train lines stayed to the east and south.

An additional factor hindering the neighborhood’s development was that the primary institutional residents of the neighborhood were an insane asylum and an orphanage, which kept property values low; residences were limited to a few mansions, some scattered rowhouses, and a few more ramshackle structures. Real estate speculators began to buy tracts of land and to agitate for the removal of the asylum in the 1880s; it left in 1892, having sold its property to Columbia University the year before.

Morningside Heights’ institutional boom, however, was begun when the Episcopal Church purchased the orphanage’s land in 1887 as the site for the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Real estate development began in earnest in 1904, when a subway line was installed under Broadway. The period of 1887 to 1910 thus marked an era of rapid development that included a transformation into a strong middle class neighborhood populated by institutions of learning, such as Columbia and the associated

Teachers and Barnard Colleges, with Columbia having purchased the asylum grounds in 1892; health, as embodied by the Episcopal Church’s St. Luke’s Hospital, which moved to its site across from the Cathedral grounds in 1892; and religion, such as the Cathedral, Jewish Theological Seminary (1903), and liberal Protestant educational bastion Union Theological Seminary (1910). Dolkart notes that it was also during this time that New York City itself was beginning to foster a self-image as a world class city, taking its place as “the preeminent economic, cultural, and intellectual center of North America.” A middle class neighborhood with a network of prominent intellectual, cultural, and religious institutions was well placed to be an exemplar of the city’s qualities.

The Riverside Church capped the period of Morningside Heights’ institutional development. While John D. Rockefeller, Jr. had purchased land on Morningside Drive for the site, he ended up making a trade for a plot at the corner of Riverside Drive and 122nd Street. The congregation built its home on an elevated spot that would be easily seen from the Hudson River. Additionally, the church would stand well above Grant’s Tomb on Riverside Drive, maximizing its visibility and offering comment via spatial hierarchy regarding the primacy of liberal Protestantism’s message over the claims of a nationalistic war memorial. Indeed, the church’s own introductory handbook made note of this, declaiming that, “The church occupies a commanding site on Morningside Heights at one of the highest points in the city.” Noting the geographic markers of the Hudson River, Riverside Drive, and Grant’s Tomb, along with the array of institutions extending to the east and south, the handbook notes that, “In a city that is constantly

24 Ibid., 39.
25 Miller fleshes out this narrative in a chapter titled, “A Church is Raised on ‘the Hill,’” *Harry Emerson Fosdick*, 200-213. Dolkart, *Morningside Heights*, 70-83 is likewise helpful in this regard.
changing, these surroundings give assurance that the environment of the church will retain its present advantages indefinitely.” The congregation and its leaders were utilizing physical space to make symbolic claims, to themselves and to observers, that their edifice embodied a message of prominence and importance. At one and the same time, situating the church within the network of institutions on Morningside Heights allowed it to develop relationships that drew on the symbolic capital therein and position itself as a paragon of liberal Protestantism for the nation, even the world.

The symbolic vocabulary of placement was not merely about attaining prestige, however; Rockefeller and Fosdick alike saw the move in terms of the church’s potential usefulness and influence, both as a demonstration of Protestantism’s continued relevance and as an assertion of liberal Protestantism’s priority over more retrograde forms. In a study of liberal Protestantism and progressive Catholicism during the first three quarters of the twentieth century, Eugene McCarraher asserts that his subjects utilized theology “as the language of a distinctly Christian social and cultural criticism,” as they sought “to position the expertise of social scientists in a religious framework.” In so doing, “liberal Protestant social gospelers and their imperfectly secularized Progressive brethren turned toward the professional middle class as the vanguard of social progress.” Riverside’s determination to embed itself within the network of institutions on Morningside Heights should also be viewed in this light. The church’s emplotment among the array of educational, cultural, and religious institutions on the hill indicated not only that it

28 Ibid., 9.
conceived of itself as having relevance to those whom the *Christian Century* writer saw as having foresworn the gospel; it also demonstrated Riverside’s sense that it was coresident within a milieu that was positioned to improve the city and the world. Fosdick tied these two missional impulses together in a pastoral letter published in *The Church Monthly*, discerning in the neighborhoods beyond Morningside Heights “a privilege and a responsibility [that] are bound to rest upon us in our own vicinity,” while asserting that the more immediate challenge was on the Heights, where modernism of a secular, rather than theological, variety was taken for granted and where liberal Christianity faced a “collision between spiritual life and prevalent paganism,” where the choice was “between a new theology and no theology.”

That Riverside’s leadership, at least, was looking to extend the congregation’s influence beyond Morningside Heights may be seen by another article published in *The Church Monthly* before the building was completed. Rev. Charles Breck Ackley, the rector of St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in the Manhattanville neighborhood, wrote about that community, which was immediately to the north of Morningside Heights. Reflecting on Riverside’s site, he notes that “you are surrounded by great institutions of culture and learning, housed in costly and beautiful buildings,” and that “you are surrounded by one of the greatest student centers in the world, an atmosphere of learning, culture, and religion.” He describes watching the church’s tower rise higher as construction proceeded, declaiming, “Thank God for the Riverside Church!” In contrast to the grandeur on Morningside Heights, Manhattanville was a hardscrabble community filled with tenements, lacking in recreational facilities, and undergoing racial transitions.

Ackley gave voice to Manhattanville residents’ sense that their valley neighborhood was overlooked, both physically by its neighbors up on the hill and economically by the broader wave of development in Manhattan. His church in that valley, while spiritual home to people from a variety of backgrounds, had neither very wealthy parishioners nor vital endowments, and thus was limited in its impact. Ackley looked to the strongly resourced, well placed, and culturally connected Riverside, couching his plea to them in the form of high hopes: “[W]ith the wonderful leadership you have, and the fine spirit among your people, I am confident that you will write a new page in social Christianity.”

Riverside’s sense that its geographic location would help to focus and foster its religious mission may also be seen in the list of organizational participants in its dedicatory events. The interdenominational dedication service on Wednesday, February 11, 1931 included participants from the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, the Greater New York Federation of Churches, and the Northern Baptist Convention. These demonstrated Riverside’s membership within the Protestant establishment. More important in terms of local emplacement, however, were the attendants at the Sunday afternoon Community Service of Dedication on February 8, 1931. These included official representatives of the Manhattanville Day Nursery; The Charity Organization Society; Harlem Branch, YWCA; Harlem Branch, YMCA; Knickerbocker Hospital; St. Luke’s Hospital; Lincoln School; Horace Mann School; West End Presbyterian Church; Cathedral of St. John the Divine; The International House; The Institute of Music; Union Theological Seminary; Jewish Theological

31 Ibid., 102.
Seminary; Teachers College; Barnard College; School of Engineering, Columbia University; School of Law, Columbia University; College of the City of New York; New York University; and Columbia University. 32 As Judith Weisenfeld has noted, “the church’s official name—The Riverside Church in the City of New York—makes it impossible to forget its urban connection.” 33 Weisenfeld is referring to the latter portion of the moniker; it may also be noted that the designation of “Riverside Church” likewise ties it to its particular section of New York City. 34 The name offered enough geographic specificity to conjure the broader associations of the Morningside Heights milieu, while simultaneously downplaying specific denominational ties. This resonated with liberalism’s ecumenical impulse and, as McCarraher’s analysis suggests, implied that the best elements of culture and the life of the mind, all on offer there on the hill, could be brought within the purview of the church.

32 Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4A Box 3 Folder 1.
34 Interestingly, and somewhat amusingly, the church’s chosen name was unsatisfying to at least one member of the Park Avenue Baptist Church. On January 28, 1928, John B. Trevor, who was an advisory member of the Building Committee, wrote to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., voicing his concern that “the term ‘Riverside Church’ sounds so like Riverside Apartments, Riverside Hotel, Riverside Garage, Riverside Tennis Courts, etc., etc., as to leave the impression on one’s mind, of a lack of dignity or appropriateness to the new building, which, in reality, is a great cathedral, and entitled to a serious designation.” Rockefeller’s response was twofold, first noting that Trevor’s proposed alternative of “Christ Church by the Riverside” might be easily mistaken for a Christian Science organization, and that the new name “followed the precedent which our church has followed in naming all of the church edifices which it has occupied, from Suffolk Street [sic]; Rockefeller here seems to have conflated the names of two prior congregational iterations, the Stanton Street Church and the Norfolk Street Baptist Church] to Fifth Avenue, then to Park Avenue and now to Riverside Drive,” that is, tying church designation to street address. Rockefeller Archive Center, Rockefeller Family Collection, Record Group 3, Series N, Box 36, Folder 301.
A Monumental Sermon: Past Appropriation, Present Security, Future Hopes

In a study of Christian Science’s early twentieth century program of church construction, Paul Eli Ivey discusses what he calls the movement’s “self-representational strategies and practices in architecture,” noting that church buildings were conceptualized as “the public face of Christian Science.” A similar self-understanding may be attributed to Riverside, which, as John Wesley Cook notes, arose in part from John D. Rockefeller, Jr.’s belief that “a great Protestant cathedral” was one of New York City’s key needs. As Dolkart narrates, Riverside owes its existence in part to a thwarting of Rockefeller’s ecumenical impulses by the Episcopal Church. With the Cathedral of St. John the Divine still under construction in the 1920s, Bishop William T. Manning issued broad fundraising appeals, emphasizing in 1925 that the cathedral would be “a shrine of prayer and worship for all people.” Eight years earlier, Rockefeller had rejected a similar appeal from a prior bishop, on the grounds that he donated only to individual Baptist churches that he attended. Yet in February 1925, Rockefeller felt, “The purpose of the cathedral is so lofty, so broad and so nobly stated, and it is being carried out so liberally” that he proffered Manning a gift of $500,000. Along with the gift, however, Rockefeller requested an appointment to the Cathedral’s board of trustees—which Manning refused for the reason that it was not yet time to open the board membership to laity from other denominations.

37 Dolkart, Morningside Heights, 68.
It would be too much to claim direct causation between Manning’s refusal of Rockefeller’s request and Riverside’s erection on Morningside Heights; as noted above, Rockefeller and others had already been thinking in that direction. The incident rather highlights that Rockefeller had become convinced of the need to work beyond denominational lines by the decidedly ecumenical cast of postwar social gospel-driven liberal Protestantism. In this he reflected a larger trend, exemplified by the preacher he sought to lure to the Park Avenue Baptist Church pulpit. As a Baptist preaching in a Presbyterian pulpit, Fosdick had in 1922 become the flashpoint of the so-called modernist-fundamentalist controversies when he preached his sermon, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” That sermon was in part a call for a Protestantism that could find a social utility and cultural unity despite fractious doctrinal divisions. When Park Avenue lured Fosdick to its pastorate by agreeing to his terms of an open membership and a new facility, Rockefeller set about the work of purchasing a site and selecting architects to design a building for this very sort of church.

If the siting of the structure bore symbolic resonance, as argued above, its architecture was no less important a communicator and conversation partner in the creation of religious meaning. As Kilde argues, churches are “at once messengers and agents, mirrors and actors, [which] enable people to think through their ideas about religiosity and convey them to the rest of the world while, in turn, influencing those ideas and shaping religion and society.”38 This suggests, rightly, that it would claim far too much to imply a one-to-one correlation between the intentions that the planners and designers had for the building and the meanings created and experienced by parishioners,

the vast majority of which are lost to posterity and which undoubtedly exceeded, even when overlapping, official intentions. With that caveat, however, I appeal to Chidester and Linenthal’s characterization of “sacred space as ritual space,” in which “ritualization is perhaps best understood as a particular type of embodied, spatial practice.” They note the dialectic between ritualization and sacred space in which, “Ritual acts of worship, sacrifice, prayer, meditation, pilgrimage, and ceremonial consecrate sacred space. Conversely, however, the demarcation of a set-apart, special place gives ritual acts their very character as a type of highly charged symbolic performance.”39 To this insight, I would add that repeated acts of interpretation outside of the ritual context can help to reinforce the internalization of the space’s sacred nature and the meanings made to inhere within it. To this end, Riverside’s own, self-published handbook offers an invaluable primary source. In addition to statements of purpose, congregational history, and activities, the handbook provides pages upon pages of photographs of the building and its iconography, along with interpretive text and lists of figures depicted within the structure. As a keepsake providing a guide to the building, the handbook offered a framework and vocabulary through which visitors and members alike could make sense of the space.

A second, complementary resource in the ongoing interpretive endeavor was the church’s periodical, The Church Monthly. Park Avenue Baptist Church began publishing The Church Monthly in November, 1926, one month after Fosdick began his pastorate, after the congregation “decided to publish at least one of Dr. Fosdick’s sermons each month incorporated in a magazine that also gave space to the on-going experiences of the

church in its fast developing programs.”

This latter category of entry in the *Monthly* included, in the years prior to Riverside’s completion, regular updates on the building process, along with photographs of construction and completed space, features on how particular rooms would be utilized, and explanations of both practical and symbolic elements. A special edition in December 1930 offered much of the interpretive work that would be published in the handbook the following year. And *The Church Monthly* continued for at least a decade to include frequent features or photographs of the building, helping to reinforce the intended symbolic meanings. Often, these were photos of elements of the building, or of the church and its surrounding neighborhood, juxtaposed with the issue’s sermon, reinforcing the relationship of building, worship, and community. For instance, a church tower photo foregrounding a gargoyle overlooking Manhattanville was placed next to Fosdick’s “Jesus’ Insistence on Moral Reality;” Fosdick’s dedicatory sermon for the building, “Despise Ye the Church of God?” was paired with a picture of the nave; and a photo of the chapel pulpit sat beside “Making the Most of Friendship.” Sometimes a connection between image and sermon was evident, or at least suggested, but not always. The larger intention seemed to be about evoking a sense of place for the reader.

Viewed from the outside, Riverside’s Gothic vernacular is striking. Not for nothing is it described as a Protestant cathedral. The Chartres Cathedral of northern France served as a primary inspiration, physically suggesting a tie to a particular expression of Christendom. Cook notes that the Gothic was chosen in part because

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40 Riverside Church Archive, informational sign.
41 Respectively, *Church Monthly*, March 1930, 82-83; *Church Monthly*, March 1931, 86-87; and *Church Monthly*, January 1937, 42-43.
neighboring Union Theological Seminary was also constructed in a Gothic style, and Dolkart describes architects Charles Collens and Henry C. Pelton as having “decided to avail themselves of an offer made by Rockefeller to fund a trip to France and Spain for the study of Gothic churches.”

The church handbook’s explanation for the choice is that, “In the architecture of the Riverside Church the cathedral-building epoch of the Middle Ages finds a new expression, adapted to the life and needs of our time.” Two key points are intertwined here. The term “cathedral-building epoch,” conjures a past of ecclesial grandeur that evinced confidence for monumental projects. Further, this imaginatively commemorated era was a particularly European past, significant because American liberal Protestants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries looked to Europe as the height of refinement in art, beauty, and spirit; as David Morgan has noted, liberal Protestants of this era bemoaned the “lack of American refinement,” addressing “the longing for the refinement of American taste [in part through] the formation of major collections of European art in Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, and New York, among other cities infused with new wealth.”

To this effect, the handbook quotes Pelton and Collens as contending that, “he who designs a great church in anything but Gothic has lost a divine spark in the structure itself which only that great art can supply.” The second part of the sentence indicates that, while evoking history, the church was not stuck there, but rather sought to bring the best elements of historical tradition into the present. Architecturally, this may be seen in the fact that the building materials were modern; a

43 Riverside Church Handbook, 25.
45 Riverside Church Handbook, 25. The initial source was Collens’s article, “Architecture of the Riverside Church,” Church Monthly, December 1926, 10.
medieval-inspired design was built around a steel frame. The edifice itself thus embodied a common liberal Protestant conviction that tradition may be formative and informative, but not authoritative; changing times and the accretions of human experience necessitated regular revision of tradition, utilizing whatever was still helpful but maintaining the freedom to change.

Riverside’s conjuring of a medieval past, however, actually entailed drawing on a more recent history. Kilde notes that American Protestants of various stripes embraced Gothic architecture from the 1830s into the 1850s. This was partially due to a desire for refinement and taste that grew as congregations competed for members, but Kilde argues that it was also tied to an earlier iteration of Protestant ecumenical hopes amid internal and external political struggles. “In their search for Christian coherence,” she contends, “evangelical Protestants . . . imagined a generic Christian origin. Retaining its claim to ancient roots, this generic Christianity not only coincided with, it also defined and advanced the unified Christianity the evangelicals sought amid the political turbulence of the United States.”

Evangelical Protestants in the latter half of the nineteenth century moved away from Gothic buildings, but the style had another revival in the early twentieth century, particularly among liberal-leaning congregations, when, as Kilde asserts, “Emphasis during services . . . was to be on worship, on higher thoughts of the sacred, and consequently, lofty spaces in which symbolic stained glass rather than people’s faces [as were on view in the nineteenth century auditorium-style sanctuaries of which she writes] drew the attention gained favor.”

In both its first and second American revivals, that is, Protestant deployment of Gothic architecture was intended to

46 Kilde, When Church Became Theater, 68.
47 Ibid., 209.
elevate the consciousness of the worshiper; in so doing, it perhaps ironically offered the prospect of stability.

It is possible to read these concerns in Fosdick’s preaching, even though he did not regularly comment on his surroundings, which would have been an awkward detraction from the conventions and aims of sermons. For instance, Fosdick’s 1933 sermon, “Christianity at Home in Chaos,” offered a hopeful assessment of Christianity’s prospects during the Depression’s upheaval, contrasting that period to the era prior to 1929; Fosdick characterized the earlier moment, which was the time of Riverside’s conception and construction, as one of “wild gambling . . . loose living . . . decay of citizenship . . . collapse of personal integrity . . . growth of selfish cynicism . . . [and] desertion of religious faith.”48 Three years later, in “The Dignity of Being Up to Date,” Fosdick offered an ironic riposte to putative libertines who claimed personal freedom without the boundaries of morality and impugned religion as outdated. “Forgive me if . . . I am indignant. For to see people, old and young, going native in unbridled sensuality, following like sheep the drinking customs of the time, accepting sophisticated selfishness as their philosophy of life, and doing this in the name of being up to date, is not only morally but intellectually disgusting.” Such people are not “up to date,” because “There is nothing new in sin.”49 Fosdick’s championing of a traditional morality offers a rhetorical parallel to the embrace of Gothic architecture—the positing of a generically Christian structure that stood against the chaos of the world. The Riverside Church, while not independently able to furnish the individual moral effort required of each of its

attendees, nonetheless stood as a bulwark against the forces of social decay and a visible symbol of Christianity’s hope.

Within its Gothic frame, several further characteristics and themes may be delineated which highlight Riverside’s lineage in the social gospel and liberal Protestantism, foreground lingering resonances and concerns of Victorianism, and connect the church with its urban landscape. I thus turn to a consideration of Riverside’s nave, its multipurpose space and a discussion of the church tower as religious skyscraper, its aspirations to provide a domestic atmosphere, and an examination of the building’s extensive iconography.

The Nave – Articulating Space for Worship

Congruent with the church’s Protestant identification and the source of Fosdick’s fame—namely, his preaching, from which his writing and his radio broadcasts arose—the sanctuary is a fitting starting point. John Wesley Cook describes Riverside as expressing “an architecture for hearing the Word.” He argues that, “The hearing of the Word is central to the concept of Riverside’s ministry and therefore central to the architectural planning of the sanctuary space. Preaching is the primary sacrament administered in the Riverside space, that is, the primary mode of encountering God. . . . a way of knowing God’s revelation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”\footnote{Cook, “A Christian Vision of Unity,” 140.} Even within the terms of Cook’s chapter, this is somewhat overstated; the visual aesthetics of the church likewise were intended as a means of fostering encounter with God. Miller quotes an exchange between Fosdick and Rockefeller in which the latter voiced the assumption

\footnote{Cook, “A Christian Vision of Unity,” 140.}
that Fosdick was interested primarily in a large auditorium fitted for preaching. Fosdick’s retort was that he wanted

two things in the new building very much—beauty, harmony, worshipfulness so that all who come in will be subdued and quieted by the “rightness” of the rooms, and then warmth, intimacy, homeliness [sic] involving good acoustics and the massing of the people as near the pulpit and each other as possible. They are not easy to combine. The second can be had always cheaply by sacrificing the first; the first can be gotten by any good architect, but often with frigidity, oppressive stateliness that would freeze any congregation and take the heart out of any sermon. I do want a warm church to preach in.51

Preaching, in other words, was to be a primary form of religious expression and activity within Riverside’s sanctuary, but it was to function in conjunction with an environmental aesthetic that ideally would foster far more than a utilitarian exchange between preacher and congregant.

The sanctuary was built to seat approximately 2,500 people distributed among the main floor and three additional galleries, one to the side and two at the south end. In accord with the above, the seating was situated so as to emphasize the importance of preaching. Yet, the pulpit is not centrally placed, but rather extends forward from the left side of the chancel. Riverside’s handbook opens its description of this part of the building by drawing attention to the five stained glass windows that rise “high above an elaborately carved chancel screen of white Caen stone.”52 The chancel screen, symbolically marking seven aspects of Christ’s ministry and celebrating human participation in them, is discussed more fully below. The central space in the chancel is occupied by the altar, whose visual priority over the pulpit suggests that Riverside’s religious life was not to be reduced to the preaching, however important that act to

51 Miller, Harry Emerson Fosdick, 207.
52 Riverside Church Handbook, 37.
weekly observance. The rest of this section in the church handbook details the construction of the pulpit, the altar (or “communion table”), baptismal font, stained glass, and the iconography of biblical and historical figures seen throughout. It is a setting for worship in which the individual is simultaneously small yet visually reminded of the importance of human activity.

Rockefeller’s assumption that Fosdick would want an auditorium for his preaching reflected the concerns of the prior generation’s evangelical Protestants, of both liberal and conservative persuasions. Kilde analyzes the trend in nineteenth century Protestant church building, particularly during the century’s latter half, of creating auditorium-style sanctuaries. She notes that the style peaked in the 1890s and vastly diminished after 1910, though Rockefeller’s assumption suggests that the impulse had not disappeared entirely. Still, while the concerns that had led to the development of auditorium sanctuaries shifted, the dynamics that led to their material adornment remained. Kilde argues that aspects of material piety filtered from homes into churches. “Evangelicals infused a strongly material element into their expression of the divine and of their beliefs.” Further, “Just as the individual family might demonstrate its sanctification by acquiring and displaying mass-produced items, from Gothic chairs to paintings of Christ, congregations demonstrated their sanctity through similar means. Stained glass, frescoes, and furnishings . . . infused evangelical churches with multiple references to sacred power.”53 As Matthew Bowman puts it, nineteenth century “evangelicals in the city [had become] increasingly aware that the church house could be [an] evangelical tool. . . . They were a fixed and visible grace that sought to redeem the

53 Kilde, When Church Became Theater, 200-201.
city as a whole, and a tangible symbol that transcended the changing landscapes around them."  

"Fosdick offers theological justification in his autobiography, reflecting that the congregation “had the unique opportunity to build . . . a cathedral, where one could preach to be sure, but where not the pulpit but the high altar would be central and where beauty of proportion and perspective, of symbolism and color would speak to the soul even when the voice of man was silent.”

This was not simply retroactive theorizing, for Fosdick had offered similar justification while the church was being constructed. For him, the social gospel was to be a key element of the church’s theology and practice—but his social gospel’s thorough grounding in personalist philosophy led him to conceive of the cultivation of individual spirituality as a key component of addressing social needs. A primary aspect of this as far as the church building was concerned involved his appeal to the ideal of beauty. As he put it in his August 1930, pastoral letter, “the new building itself should be an inestimable help to us in our spiritual ministry to the city. Beauty is a roadway to God.” The opposite, he argued, had too often been characteristic of Protestantism, namely that it had “neglected that fact and has relied too exclusively on talking. It has often reduced worship to a few exercises of devotion appended to a sermon. Such starvation diet will not serve rightly the needs of the spiritual life.” With that in mind, “we should rejoice that we are to have a structure made for worship, conducive to worship, in which worship can be made beautiful and effective.”

It was through feeding the spirit with, and in an

55 Fosdick, Living of These Days, 191.
environment of, beauty that congregants would be filled and empowered to address the conditions of their lives and the needs of the city.

Fosdick did receive some reassurances that people were spiritually moved by Riverside’s beauty. For instance, a Louisville, Kentucky-based rabbi wrote in 1931 to offer his thanks and observations after a visit. He wrote of arriving early and taking his place in “the spiritual breadline” of people waiting to get in—using an image of Depression-era hunger relief for the spiritual “food” on offer in worship. In addition to making special note of the courteous treatment of all visitors by the ushers, he offers that, “Wherever my eye turned I was met with a chaste beauty that made for reverence and a worshipful attitude.” Further, the “beautiful music . . . attuned us to the mood of serving the Lord with gladness, gratitude and resignation.” Of the sanctuary, he notes, “Its delicate beauty reminded me of the Cathedral of Milan” with its combination of “saintliness and beauty in a marvelous harmony. Jerusalem, Nazareth and Athens formed a Holy Trinity there and used architecture for their expression.” The service itself heightened and was heightened by the setting, such that when it “was over I experienced a sense of exaltation as I am sure the other worshippers did also.”57 For Fosdick, his correspondent’s rabbinic status, combination of social spiritual imagery, and glowing assessment of the building’s beauty and impact would have been powerful confirmation that Riverside was successfully broadcasting a version of Protestantism that was culturally relevant and poised to partner across denominational lines to improve the nation and the world.

57 Joseph Rauch to Harry Emerson Fosdick, February 2, 1931, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4A Box 2 Folder 1.
The Tower and Multipurpose Space: Institutional Past, Skyscraping Present

At 392 feet tall, the church tower is the visually dominant element of the entire structure, and may be alternately (or simultaneously) construed as imposing or beckoning. The New York Times article reporting on the 1928 fire noted that the church “is to be larger than any church edifice in America except a few cathedrals now building. Its tower is to be higher than any other church tower in New York.”58 Neither Cook, nor Miller, nor the church’s handbook devotes much room to interpretation of this aspect of the church’s utilization of space; Cook is most interested in the construction challenges posed by the structure, the handbook offers a summation of the working floors, and all three texts largely stick to the descriptive mode. This is an important task in itself, for in addition to its visual prominence, the tower is the setting for a great deal of the church activity that took place outside of the worship services. The tower consists of twenty-one working floors (eighteen if the first three, which the handbook notes are not easily distinguishable from the rest of the building, are discounted), topped by an additional five floors’ worth of space housing the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Carillon, presented by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. as a tribute to his mother. The carillon was originally housed in the Park Avenue Baptist Church, and was composed of fifty-three bells; upon moving to Riverside, the addition of nineteen more bells made it “not only the largest but the heaviest in the world.”59 Atop the bells sits an observation deck from which the vastness of the city may be seen.

The Church Monthly occasionally offered passing commentary on the symbolism of the tower and of the building as a whole. In an article published before ground had been broken for the new structure, architect Charles Collens named his temporal and symbolic aims for the edifice. “Stone, steel and concrete will all be so designed and assembled as to create a structure whose enduring qualities will far outlast its more contemporary neighbors. For many generations to come the Tower should symbolize the finger of God pointing upward and the carillon celestial music.”

A 1934 Monthly editorial entitled “A City Set on a Hill”—simultaneously alluding to the Gospel of Matthew and to Puritan John Winthrop—tied together a double symbolism of building and minister. “The building itself is a symbol. Over and over one catches bits of conversation and discussion as to what it means to see the tower rise before one and to hear the music of its bells,” note the editors. Wed to the symbol of the building itself, however, is a further one. “The preacher is a symbol, much discussed, around which the hopes not only of individuals but of churches center.” Membership in Riverside, or even simple attendance, thus does the further work of making “one somehow a symbol of privilege and obligation.” And this abundance of symbolism, coalescing so powerfully around the tower’s imposing presence, leads to an “unnoticed procession of men and women, usually not members and often not Protestants, who come in with their baffling personal problems and sometimes in desperate spiritual and physical need.”

The very meanings inherent in the church’s existence and work were figured in and broadcast through the tower’s stone and steel; it served as a beacon, simultaneously (or variously) summoning anyone within eyeshot with a promise of solace and a reminder of mission.

Moving in the opposite direction, but further amplifying the tower’s message, there are two floors below ground that extend the length of the building. These include club rooms, rooms for the choir and the ushers, and the organist’s studio, as well as the church’s main kitchen. There are also facilities for the engagement of intellectual, cultural, and recreational concerns. An assembly hall with a seating capacity of 800 offered space for the Men’s Bible Class meetings, large meetings and social functions, and the young people’s Riverside Guild’s dramatic worship services, as well as being equipped for theatrical performances and movie projection. To the north of the assembly hall is a gymnasium with basketball and handball courts, exercise facilities, and locker rooms with showers, and to its south are four bowling alleys. While impressive, it should be noted that this was not unique. Kilde notes the rise in the 1880s and 1890s of institutional churches as “one of the cornerstones” of the social gospel, quoting social gospeler Josiah Strong:

The Institutional Church succeeds because it adapts itself to changing conditions. It finds that the people living around it have in their homes no opportunity to take a bath; it therefore furnishes bathing facilities. It sees that the people have little or no healthful social life; it accordingly opens attractive social rooms, and organizes clubs for men, women, boys and girls. The people know little of legitimate amusement; the church therefore provides it. They are ignorant of house-hold economy; the church established its cooking-schools, its sewing classes, and the like. In their homes the people have few books and papers; in the church they find a free reading-room and library. Their homes afford no opportunity for intellectual cultivation; the church opens evening schools and provides lecture courses. As in the human organism, when one organ fails, its functions are often undertaken and more or less imperfectly performed by some other organ; so in the great social organism of the city, when the home fails, the church sometimes undertakes the functions of the home. Such a church we call “institutional.”

Kilde writes that, by the twentieth century, the physical plants of such churches “almost always included a gymnasium, men’s and women’s shower or bath, locker rooms, reading rooms, classrooms, kitchens, and dining rooms. In addition, game rooms . . . were popular, as were bowling alleys.”

Riverside’s tower and multipurpose space must thus be contextualized within the dynamics of American urbanization and the dual sense of fear and purpose that the city engendered within white Protestantism. Fosdick himself placed Riverside within the institutional church tradition in his autobiography, though he simultaneously sought to distance the church from the perceived diminution of preaching and worship in institutional churches. He writes that Riverside’s Christianity was meant to be expressed “in service to the community at large as well as to our own membership. . . . [I]n a city like New York no other kind of program meets the issue. On every side of every metropolitan church is need—physical, financial, psychological, spiritual. . . . The Riverside Church set out with a seven-day-a-week program to meet these needs.” This could be seen by casting a view toward the “needy neighborhoods” to the church’s north, but even more immediately it related to the intellectual setting of Morningside Heights, home to what those whom the Christian Century article in 1930 had deemed as either hostile or indifferent to Christianity; the church handbook echoes this assessment and the sense of duality by averring that the “church feels deeply the responsibilities imposed upon it and the opportunities placed before it by the character of its community.” The church was keen to engage its intellectual neighbors in ways that would kindle

63 Kilde, When Church Became Theater, 186.
64 Fosdick, Living of These Days, 203.
65 Riverside Church Handbook, 22, 10.
spirituality, broadcast Christianity’s continuing relevance, and buttress liberal Protestantism’s cultural influence. As such, it aligned its space and rhetoric with conceptions of home that will be explored more fully below.

First, however, the church’s space and utilization thereof must be further contextualized within the urban milieu in a way that relates the developing skyline to concepts of differentiation and professionalization. The construction of the tower makes Riverside an ecclesial emblem of improvements in modern building materials and techniques and the attendant restructuring of physical space. The exterior offers traditional stone and mortar, but encases a thoroughly modern steel frame that had to be sturdy enough to hold the carillon’s weight and accommodate four elevators. Conn and Orsi have both noted that the restructuring of urban physical space had profound implications for the structuring of social space, with the symmetrical grid pattern of city streets, which allowed for the movement of goods and labor, simultaneously reshaping patterns of residence and interaction. Orsi notes further that the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century boom of skyscrapers “took the grid form, with all its ambitions for profitable efficiency and order, and drove it vertically, into the air.”

Eugene Carder, on Riverside’s pastoral staff, was cognizant of the ways in which highrises were changing urban skylines; in a 1931 article he characterizes the older symbolism of steeples as denoting “a finger pointing upward, calling the passer-by and all who went that way to a consciousness of God.” However, “In the modern city . . . the significance of that gesture is fast being lost.” Yet, pointing in particular to its location, he contends that, “For the time being . . . The Riverside Church is fortunate in having a setting which gives it a

chance to stand out by itself for what it is, a church.”67 What he might have added is that Riverside’s mix of Gothic architectural design and modern construction techniques and materials, framing a medieval aesthetic around steel beams, incorporating elevators that moved users of the building from floor to floor, allowed the church tower, in some sense, to mirror the urban skyscraper. The usable space for the congregational and programmatic life that took place outside of Sunday morning worship was aligned vertically, towering over the city streets.

Fosdick thought about the shifts in urban physical and social space as the church was being constructed, offering a forecast for an altered ecclesiastic landscape. In a 1929 article offering reflections on the state of Christian ministry and its future, he echoes a liberal and ecumenical impulse toward institution building that seems particularly notable for his vision espousing a Christianity freed from constraints of denominational authority. He avers that “the pressure of our centralized population is slowly but surely forcing us to fewer but larger churches,” which would be staffed by teams of ministers reflecting “the universal tendency to specialization.” Drawing on the language of corporations, he predicts “an acceleration of this tendency, with fewer and larger churches doing a much more diversified business.”68 Riverside’s best known pastor thus offered a model of Christian ministry’s future, in which larger buildings would serve as the space from which specialized ministerial staff offered a diversified product within the spiritual marketplace, that looked a great deal like Riverside operated in practice.

The trend toward differentiation, specialization, and efficiency in white Protestant churches had been operating for a generation before Riverside was built. James H.

Moorhead sets this in the context of the growing prestige of business; churches, seeking to maintain their own cultural prestige, found that they needed more money in order to fund the facilities and programs through which they attracted congregants. The age of Rockefeller (Senior), Carnegie, and Morgan thus led to a “mystique of organizational efficiency” in which churches “sought to ape the methods of business in order to render their operations more effective.”

Similarly, Charles D. Cashdollar systematically examines businesslike shifts in various aspects of congregational life, such as the move from unaccompanied congregational psalm singing to programs of paid organists and choristers, the development of systematic benevolences and planned giving, and the efficient management of church committees and clubs. “The mushrooming number of church clubs and societies in the 1880s led to its own merger movement that mirrored the objectives, if not the viciousness, of business consolidation.”

While Cashdollar’s study focuses strictly on the family of Reformed denominations, his analysis holds true for other Protestants, as well. As William L. Leach, writing in an earlier generation, summarizes, the first decade of the twentieth century saw profound shifts in church finance, “graded Sunday school lessons were introduced; church offices began to make their appearances; and, for the first time in American history, the minister, as head of the church, found himself responsible for directing an organization in addition to conducting services.”

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A move up the floors of Riverside’s tower enables a reading of the building that integrates the institutional church and business efficiency models into the urban vertical society. Of the eighteen working floors, fully ten are devoted to church school programming, covering age groups from kindergarten through high school. This fact in itself offers testament to the vast importance placed on education in Riverside’s enactment of liberal Protestantism; in contrast to an earlier model of unified lessons, Riverside made the move to graded lessons noted above, devoting not only separate rooms but separate floors to different age groups, and drawing on the most recent pedagogical methods. In noticing the connection between the design and utilization of space and the religious praxis enabled thereby, it is worth quoting from the church handbook at some length. “The church’s activities,” notes the handbook, revolve in a large measure around an educational program. This begins with children two or three years old and extends through the various age groups to adulthood. The nucleus of this comprehensive program is the Church School with its nursery, its kindergarten, its primary, junior, junior high school and senior high school departments. For mature men and women there are the Men’s Bible Class and the Women’s Bible Class. The Riverside Guild for students and older young people provides for the period between adolescence and mature adulthood. Parents whose children are enrolled in the Church School constitute the Parents’ Council to promote effective cooperation between the home and the church. Courses for parents analyze the problems of a Christian home in relation to the spiritual and social development of childhood.72

In addition to the age-inclusive nature of this programming philosophy, it is interesting to observe the ways in which Riverside sought to blur spatial boundaries in ways akin to

72 Riverside Church Handbook, 12. A full discussion of Riverside’s educational programming is beyond the scope of this project, but some helpful description may be found in Miller, Harry Emerson Fosdick, 228-242, and in James Hudnut-Beumler, “The Riverside Church and the Development of Twentieth-Century American Protestantism,” in The History of the Riverside Church in the City of New York, Paris et al., 30-34. Additionally, Morgan, Protestants and Pictures, 305-338, offers useful insights into liberal Protestant pedagogy, and Kilde, When Church Became Theater, 170-196 examines the development of Protestant Sunday schools in church buildings.
those seen in Orsi’s discussion of the Harlem *festa* by connecting the values and activities of home and church.

Settled directly in the middle of the ten floors devoted to the church school, with five below and five above, the Women’s Bible Class occupies the tower’s ninth floor. As the handbook phrases it, “The ninth floor is set aside for women.”\(^{73}\) This utilization of space echoes the larger pattern in Riverside’s design and usage, rooted in a particular past and looking toward a shifting future, simultaneously conservative and progressive. On the one hand, placing the “women’s floor” amidst the church school floors hearkens to the norms of Victorian domesticity in which women were tasked with providing their children’s religious education and moral formation.\(^{74}\) The floor includes not only the Women’s Bible Class space, but also an office for the class secretary, a lounge, and a kitchen. Yet, while this arrangement bears some strong resonances with the model of the Victorian home and its attendant gender roles, it also reflects movement beyond the Victorian era insofar as the floor served for semimonthly meetings of the Riverside Business and Professional Women’s Club. Above the educational floors, in ascending order, are a young people’s social and meeting room; the Sewing Room, set up during the Depression as a space where working class women could engage in labor to help support their families; and three floors of office space for the ministers, their assistants, the Church School director, church business offices, and conference rooms. Reflecting again the impulse to have church space reflect social space, the twentieth floor was initially

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\(^{73}\) *Riverside Church Handbook*, 42, 125.  
planned as the Men’s Library and Reading Room. The top working floor contained a crafts room and the carillonneur’s studio.

*A Home in the City*

The foregoing analysis suggests that the deployment of space seen in Riverside’s tower and the two floors below ground presented an embodiment of the religious ideology represented in Fosdick’s preaching. Educational facilities, meeting space for intellectually- and socially-focused gatherings, recreational and exercise facilities, theatrical and cinematic space: these offered gospel-soaked alternatives to similar institutions and spaces within the public sphere, where even if the activities were not worshipful in nature they were nonetheless hallowed by being housed within the grandeur of a Gothic skyscraper. And that term—“housed”—suggests another way of expressing this idea, which is that Riverside aimed to offer an extension of home space. James Hudnut-Beumler argues that, in this capacity, Riverside functioned “like many other Protestant churches in early-twentieth-century American cities,” in that it “filled the spaces in times outside the worship hour in ways that consciously or unconsciously replicated the social world of the village or small town where Protestant churches were most often found.” That is, white Protestant churches, including Riverside, aimed to provide “a home in the city,” a place of homogeneity and safety within urban spaces,

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75 “The Growth of a Church Library,” *Church Monthly*, December, 1931, 300-301 indicates that the library had been moved down one floor by the end of the year as a means of increasing efficiency by eliminating duplication of books and magazines purchased by various congregational groups; it was accessible to anyone during church operating hours. As late as March 1933, *Church Monthly* reproduced the handbook’s schematic listing the twentieth floor as “Men’s Library and Reading Room.” The May 1939 issue corrected this, listing the library on the nineteenth floor and labeling the twentieth floor as “Men’s Club Room.”
wherein could be fostered social networks among the native-born, who did not form extra-churchly institutions as immigrants tended to do.\textsuperscript{76}

The notion of church as home, as Hudnut-Beumler describes, was not unique to Riverside—nor was it unique to the twentieth century. Kilde convincingly maps Victorian household ideology and practice in the middle and late nineteenth century onto the development of Protestant church as home space. She argues, however, that the notion lost much of its relevance after the turn of the century, in large part because the family had been so successfully established as the premier social institution that it no longer required religious sanction. She additionally ties the putative decline to the “increasing irrelevance of the boundary between the private sphere and the public. Education, service, consumerism, and recreation frequently took family members, particularly women and children, outside the private domicile. The need for churches to negotiate between these two spheres slowly vanished.”\textsuperscript{77} Riverside provides a counterargument to this periodization, however; its immediate context within a network of institutions of higher learning, including the foreign students living at International House, was one mitigating factor. Trends are not always so easily compartmentalized within historical periods; again, Riverside’s space demonstrates numerous facets of rooting within the past while searching out a new way ahead. And the Depression, with its heavy toll on families, offered further impetus to create homelike ties within the church.

\textsuperscript{76} Hudnut-Beumler, “The Riverside Church and the Development of Twentieth-Century American Protestantism,” 22-23.

\textsuperscript{77} Kilde, \textit{When Church Became Theater}, 203; see especially 146-169.
Thus, the concept of church as home and the challenge of fostering that ideal within an institution as large as Riverside, is found in multiple places within the congregation’s literature. Domiciliary language echoes in Fosdick’s August 1929 pastoral letter as he addresses the ambivalent feelings of leaving Park Avenue’s building along with the excitement of entering the new edifice. Of the former he notes that the investment of “thought and affection in the building” and “years of work and service there” led to the “accumulat[ion of] many cherished memories. . . . The Park Avenue church is singularly beautiful and its homeliness has helped to make worship there an intimate individual experience.” Of the new space, he asserts, “we face the problems of domesticating a very large church building.”

In a similar vein, the January 1930 Church Monthly included an article detailing the activities conducted in the finished parts of the building, and the projected expansion as more areas reached completion. “It is fortunate the two floors available for use this season include equipment for the service of meals,” writes the author. “These frequent luncheons, teas and suppers which have their place on the week’s schedule provide an opportunity for members and friends of the Church to meet under informal conditions that promote mutual understanding and appreciation.”

The church handbook likewise resounds with language of home, describing the building as a place where “each week the people of the parish and their neighbors eat together, play together, discuss their problems together, as well as worship together. . . . Emphatically this is a family church.”

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79 “The Riverside Church in 1930,” Church Monthly, January 1930, 47.
80 Riverside Church Handbook, 10.
to simultaneously foster a sense of distinction from a world which was falling short of its highest calling and to equip individuals to go out and act within that world.

Eugene Carder supplements this point in a letter he wrote to *Life* magazine. Carder wrote in response to the “Metropolitan Religion” column in the February 1933 issue of the magazine, which contrasted Riverside’s operation to that of a stereotypical suburban church, which the writer characterized as “a small, intimate group, bound together by acquaintance and the personality of the pastor.” Riverside, on the other hand, offered all sorts of varied activities in its fully equipped building, and, “Nobody invited us to a welfare supper or pestered us to sign up with a Bible class. . . . The Church, it seems, is determined to carry on. If it must enter the entertainment business to do it, well then, it will enter the entrtmt [sic] business.”81 In the May issue, Carder offers a letter of appreciation for the general friendliness of the column, but takes issue with the characterization of church offerings as entertainment. “As a matter of fact,” he writes, “the thing we are going in for in a large way just now in the Riverside Church is relief. Even such items on our program as would look to be of the entertainment variety are indulged in primarily for the service they render as helpful morale builders in this time of stress and strain.”82 Here, then, the context of the Depression adds to the interpretation of the space. It is religious space that expands and blurs the bounds of home space and “secular” social space, and this church home space is meant to bolster the spirit weighted down by the economic malaise.

Iconography: Tradition and Innovation

It is in Riverside’s iconography that the theme of simultaneous conservation and progress is perhaps most strikingly evident, for it is here that the church draws on tradition while also offering bold innovation that broadcasts its theology and self-understanding. The building is adorned, inside and out, with figures carved from stone or depicted in stained glass. This was not new, but continued a development that had become commonplace in Protestant houses of worship in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Figures inhabit the entrances of the church and virtually any segment of the sanctuary on which the eyes might rest; the encounter of the live and the artistically rendered human is a prominent aspect of the Riverside edifice. There are biblical figures—Jesus in various guises and stages of earthly and heavenly ministry and presence; prophets; angels; and other characters from scriptural narrative—saintly personages enshrined in ecclesiastic memory, representatives of the generically human, and verifiably historic individuals.

The main entrance of the church is through the west portal at the base of the tower on Riverside Drive, and it is here that Riverside’s building makes a unique contribution in embodying liberal Protestantism through its representation of bodies, or rather in the bodies that it represents. The central feature of the portal is a tympanum in which the figure of Christ is seated, looking out upon the world and surrounded by four other figures which are meant to symbolize distinct portrayals of Christ’s character in the

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83 Kilde, When Church Became Theater and Sacred Power, Sacred Space; Bowman, in “The Urban Pulpit,” offers an interesting study of contrasting New York Protestant approaches to the meanings of church buildings and iconography in the late nineteenth century.
canonical gospels. The portal also features a panel above the door and below the tympanum in which assembled figures look in different directions—some toward Christ and some away. At ground level surrounding the doors are figures representing assorted prophets and followers of Jesus. For all of the focus on Christ, however, it is the twinned arches surrounding the tympanum that are spatially dominant, and in which are housed “forty-two leading personalities of science, philosophy and religion.” These figures are diverse in background and historical setting, bounded neither by epoch nor by religious affiliation. The reigning idea in the choice of characters had to do with their perceived contributions to the advancement of humankind and the flourishing of personality—a sculpted representation of Fosdick’s social gospel. Thus is the church’s main entrance populated by such diverse figures as Pythagoras, Socrates, Galileo, Moses, Confucius, Buddha, “Mohammed,” and, quite tellingly, Charles Darwin. The blending of old and new irrefutably marked the site as a Christian church, and the shaping of the space with such figures was meant to evoke in worshipers a sense that they were entering into a space made holy not only because of the veneration of God that happened therein, but because it was reflective of and somehow related to the best that humanity had to offer. As the handbook phrases it, “Seemingly [Christ] is gazing . . . upon the world which these distinguished figures have created each in his special sphere—the material world of

84 Riverside Church Handbook, 26.
85 Ibid., 86. The sole personage represented in the arches who was still living at the time of the church’s creation was Albert Einstein. Cook repeats a humorous incident in which Einstein visited the church out of curiosity to see himself utilized in a Christian church’s symbolism. On receiving an affirmative answer to his query about being the only living individual thus represented, he reportedly muttered to himself, “I’ll have to be very careful as to what I say and what I do for the rest of my life.” Cook, “A Vision of Christian Unity,” 154-155. Fosdick records the incident with slightly different details but with the same punch line in Living of These Days, 192.
science, the intellectual world of philosophy and the spiritual world of religion, a
universe interpreted through the eye, the mind and the heart.”

Inside the sanctuary, the chancel screen is of particular note. As mentioned above,
the screen is comprised of seven carved panels that “interpret distinctive aspects of the
Master’s life.” Returning to the theme of human agency as religious value that was seen
in the west portal’s arches, the handbook notes of the chancel screen, “It is not as a God
reigning in aloof majesty that we find Him here. We discover Him as a Man among men,
presiding over and mingling with a select company of men and women through whom the
Christ-influence has been exerted for the betterment of mankind.” Each of the panels
includes a representation of Christ along with representatives of each of the following
categories: physicians, teachers, prophets, humanitarians, missionaries, reformers, and
lovers of beauty. The categories are interesting in themselves, for they illumine and
ensconce within the worship space characteristic emphases of Fosdick’s brand of liberal
Protestantism, grounded in personalist philosophy and infused with social gospel
convictions: the world may be made to more fully reflect the Kingdom of God when it is
acted upon by individuals who have aspired to greatness in their own spheres and have
been nurtured by the spirituality of beauty, particularly as expressed through European-
style art.

Examining Riverside’s iconographic utilization of gender and race offers a sense
of timebound timelessness, enshrining in stone a historical moment in which social
gospel liberalism still drew on tropes of its past while seeking a new future. This is
reflected, for instance, on the church’s exterior, where at the northwest corner is found

86 Riverside Church Handbook, 26-27.
87 Ibid., 37.
“the woman’s porch, so called from the four sculptured figures of Biblical women who exemplified in their lives and characters the highest qualities of womanhood.” On the north-facing side are Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, the former symbolizing “spiritual devotion” and the latter “the patron saint of good housewives.” On the opposite corner are Eunice and Lois, respectively the mother and grandmother of the apostle Paul’s young protégé Timothy, who “represent the good women of all time whose ‘unfeigned faith’ has blessed their sons and daughters unto the third and fourth generations.” The arch at this entrance contains nature symbolism to “commemorate especially the powers and virtues of womanhood,” following a Victorian tendency to denote spaces of feminine nurture through depictions of the natural world. Other women portrayed in the church’s iconography are either biblical characters or generic figures, save for St. Faith, whose martyrdom is depicted in a stained glass window. The chancel screen provides minor exceptions. The handbook describes the screen as showing Christ “mingling with a select company of men and women,” and the Iconography Committee did choose some women for inclusion. Of the sixty-three non-Christ figures carved into the screen, four are women: Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, who “devoted to charity her life of self-denial,” Ann Judson, a “type of the missionary’s wife,” Florence Nightingale, “founder of the first school for nurses,” and “Mary the Mother of Jesus.” All four are found in the panel dedicated to humanitarians, suggesting that Riverside’s liberal Protestantism continued to cast women primarily in Victorian terms as nurturers.

The chancel screen likewise furnishes an example of fixity and change in its deployment of race. Save for one, all of the figures in the screen are either drawn from

88 Ibid., 28.
89 Ibid., 121.
biblical narrative (and depicted with European features) or are European or European-American. The one exception to this, situated along with the women characters in the humanitarian screen, is Booker Washington, “pathfinder of the Negro race.”

Washington had shown up as a homiletical example on several occasions, especially to illustrate the power of forgiveness and the debilitating effects of prejudice on the person who wields it; within Riverside’s nave, his image in the chancel screen would have added further homiletic resonance. In hindsight, this is not without its problems; the inclusion of a sole African American figure served to highlight the assumption of whiteness as the default mode for representing humanity, and the thoughtful critic might wish that the Iconography Committee had expanded its range of representations. On the other hand, this was a powerful statement within the iconography of a white Protestant congregation that African Americans participated within the ministry of Christ; worshipers each Sunday could gaze upon, and have their gaze returned by, the visage of a black American man. The power of this utilization of space in 1930s white America should not be minimized. Similarly, it was important for worshipers to gain the message that women were active participants in embodying the spirit of Jesus in the world at large. The chancel screen in particular, then, furnished a decisive iconographic deployment of its era’s social gospel.

90 Ibid.
91 Notable examples include Fosdick’s 1927 “The Sin of Prejudice,” and the very similar 1934 offering, “A Plea for Goodwill.” Both quote Washington as finding the impetus for his life’s work in the respect he received from a white man, Captain Howard, and thereby effectively cast white people as the catalysts for undoing racism. As Fosdick puts it in “A Plea for Goodwill,” “So a Southern gentleman poured friendliness into a very difficult situation and awakened a responsive goodwill in Booker Washington, which, I suspect, was the greatest contribution that that Southern gentleman ever had an opportunity to make to civilization.” Harry Emerson Fosdick, The Secret of Victorious Living: Sermons on Christianity Today (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1934), 83.
Mediating and Mediated: Broadcasting the Church Home into Family Homes

In her study of consumer culture, the Great Depression, and critical responses to them, Rita Barnard notes the frequency of such juxtapositions “as Dorothea Lange’s 1939 photograph of two hoboes walking up a dusty road, next to a billboard that says, ‘NEXT TIME TRY THE TRAIN,’ and Margaret Bourke-White’s 1937 image of folks in a breadline, patiently waiting beneath a billboard proclaiming ‘THE WORLD’S HIGHEST STANDARD OF LIVING.’” The coexistence of abundance and scarcity in the 1930s left Riverside anxious to justify its opulent building. Fosdick was cognizant that the church’s building carried an economic symbolism that could be at odds with the values he hoped to broadcast; the congregation’s decision to pour such wealth into the construction of its building could easily be perceived as being at odds with its religious message. In his 1930 pastoral letter, he opines, “Doubtless you are asked, as I am, how so large an expenditure on a building can be justified when poverty lurks menacingly in the dark shadows of our city and unemployment stalks our streets. . . . We must, so far as possible, forestall misinterpretation of our spirit and not let our good be evil spoken of.” The building should serve as a challenge to the congregation: “We know that so costly a structure must be justified and that it can be justified only by commensurate service.” The church handbook likewise echoes the tensions that could arise from the imbrication of spiritual mission and economic reality in its assertion that, “This church believes in the ministry of beauty, and makes no apology for building as impressive a sanctuary as it was

able.” The unnoted implication, of course, is that, especially in the face of the Depression, it had been asked to make such an apology. Anxiety over public perception of the church’s physical plant came into particular relief when *Life* magazine ran a series on American churches, highlighting Riverside in its December 1937 issue. The archival record evidences a good deal of consternation once it was revealed that Margaret Bourke-White would be the photographer; church leaders feared a public pillorying via images. The photo essay turned out to be quite favorable, showing numerous aspects of the building and the variety of activities that went on inside, declaring that, “Riverside Church is a great community center.” Nonetheless, the fact that Bourke-White’s assignment was cause for alarm demonstrates the church’s sensitivity to its public portrayal in troubled times.

This was a concern even prior to the Depression, however. Fosdick was determined that the Riverside Church building would be a physical crystallization and representation of his theology, a liberal Protestantism that advocated a social gospel grounded in the philosophy of personalism. He made this clear in the remarks he offered at the laying of the church’s cornerstone on November 20, 1927. “Religion,” he argued, “easily coordinates itself around two great centers: it is personal and it is social. On the one side it is a deep and inward individual experience of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and on the other side it must institutionalize itself and organize its activities for the propagation of its work.” Presaging Reinhold Niebuhr’s 1932 assertion in *Moral Man, Immoral Society* that human social organization tends to compound the sin of group self-interest, Fosdick admitted that, “organization is always dangerous.” Still, he argued,

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religion must be organized, “because no individual alone is sufficient to know God, but our faith is enriched through our cooperation in worship and effort in the church.” Thus he offered his hopes that the physical plant of the Riverside Church would both symbolize and enable a marriage of both poles of Christianity: “As today we lay the cornerstone of this church, I hope that it may be for many of us more than a formal matter: a challenge, namely, to our interest, not simply in personal faith but in cooperative Christianity.”

This was the message, or set of messages, that Fosdick desired the church building to broadcast. Cementing this message required further processes of mediation that connected the church home to the family home. Cashdollar notes that church newsletters started to gain in popularity in the 1880s, as printing became less expensive; for Riverside, *The Church Monthly* effectively provided a physical artifact to tie home and church together. Mailed, or purchased at and carried out, from the church to the homes of members and subscribers—anyone with a pledge record was subscribed—*The Church Monthly* served as a record of and interpretation of various church activities. Regular features such as the inclusion of a Fosdick sermon and prayer and reports from various groups undergirded and reinforced the spiritual and social nature of events held within the church space. And, as noted above, there was often a photograph or two of some part of the building, thus bringing some aspect of the building into the home. Along with these elements, the *Monthly* reinforced the economic elements of the building and the activities it generated, especially during the annual pledging season, and it connected

96 Harry Emerson Fosdick, Address Before the Laying of the Cornerstone, November 20, 1927, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 1B Box 4 Folder 12.
congregants, subscribers, and other readers to the church’s social ministry. For instance, the March 1933 issue includes a photograph of women at work in the Sewing Room, which, the text proclaims, “employs sixty women four days each week from January to June at $3.00 per day, at an aggregate of $15,000 contributed by interested friends as an extra-budget activity. This money would not be available and this work could not go on if you were not doing your part as generously and loyally as you are. It is your work.”97 The item thus deftly performs the justificatory work for which Fosdick aimed, tying together the physical space, its utility in terms of social usefulness, and a broad appeal to the individual reader to continued generosity within the context of the Great Depression.

As a periodical, the Monthly tied various constituencies into the life of the church and its ministries who had not physical contact with the building itself, projecting it well beyond the boundaries of Morningside Heights. Its regular and occasional offerings provided multiple points of contact for readers. One 1928 article included a photograph of an Oregon mother and her four young sons, sitting in their living room engaged in a family Bible lesson and worship service. The text notes that, while Fosdick’s sermons were not yet being broadcast that far, “The Church Monthly takes the place of radio in bringing his messages to the Pacific Coast.” The woman, Mrs. Myrtle E. Lee, indicates that Fosdick’s biblical interpretations and his printed prayers “have been helpful” in providing “a spiritual unity and uplift for the day.”98 The family, with the help of the Monthly, was tied into the very same spiritual project which the church aimed to carry out locally within its building. This particular item illustrated the reach and impact of the Monthly beyond church doors, while simultaneously reinforcing for those who made

97 Church Monthly, March 1933, 90.
Riverside their church home the importance of the activities in which they engaged through their physical association.

_The Church Monthly_ offered other connections to and reinforcements of the building, as well. For instance, in 1934 and 1935, the _Monthly_ ran a series of articles on carillons from around the world, written by their carillonneur, Kamille Lefèvere. The articles featured photographs and interpretive text, and performed multiple functions for readers. At one level, they simply informed and expanded horizons of knowledge. But they also reinforced the prestige of Riverside’s own carillon, which was the largest in the nation. The historic perspectives on European carillons offered additional spiritual capital, via association, to Riverside’s. Again, for _Monthly_ readers in other states and even other countries, this tied them in some sense to Riverside’s physical plant. For Riverside’s members and attendees, it enhanced the building’s capacity to structure their spiritual experiences and interpretations of the space.

Perhaps the most explicit example in which the building was mediated to a variety of constituents through the _Monthly_ occurred during the pledge season in 1933. Financial pledging during the Depression had understandably gone down; a year earlier, an article pleaded for people to be as generous as possible in order to avoid budget cuts.99 The March 1933 issue included a two-page spread featuring a photograph of the building with banners drawn, as if emanating from the building itself, listing categories—“ministerial staff,” “religious education,” “organizations within the church,” “ministerial staff secretaries,” “organ, choir, carillon,” “business office,” “general expenses,” “benevolences,” “insurance and taxes,” and “building maintenance and operation”—and

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The mediated image of the church itself thus came to stand in as the symbol of all its actual and varied functions, spiritual and pragmatic, which required funding even—perhaps especially—in the Depression in order to keep the building and the programming it housed functioning, and thereby to justify it.

While *The Church Monthly* was a powerful in-house medium that could further amplify the messages and experiences the church building was meant to broadcast, Fosdick appreciated the occasional outside mediation, as well. For instance, Lewis Gaston Leary discusses Riverside’s building in his 1933 volume *Problems of Protestantism*. He professes to be most impressed by the church’s chapel, “whose only furnishings consist of a small bench and a *prie-dieu* set before Hoffman’s painting of Christ in Gethsemane,” and which was commonly used for funerals, where “those who mourn may come and kneel before the figure of the kneeling Christ.” Simultaneously extolling Riverside and taking a swipe at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Leary writes,

> From the tiny mortuary chapel to the long, high nave whose solemn perspective culminates in the Table of the Lord . . . and the heavenward-reaching tower whose bells, through the wonder of radio, are heard around the world, the Riverside Church is—a church. That, I believe, is its greatest contribution to American religion. It is the churchliest Protestant church in all the land. So it is not called “Dr. Fosdick’s church” any more. It is what another great structure a few blocks to the east of it fatuously claims to be, “a place of prayer for all people.”

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100 *Church Monthly*, March 1933, 92-93.
Riverside’s building and its stature as a true cathedral of liberal Protestantism were thus broadcast to Leary’s audience, as was his assumption that liberal Protestantism was a true representative of the Christian tradition.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Laura Joy Hawley, who had listened to Fosdick over the radio for several years before ever making it to Morningside Heights to visit the church, and who conveyed her impressions after several visits into a magazine article. Juxtaposing the stateliness and beauty of the structure with the genial interpersonal interactions she experienced there, she notes, “[T]his is the miracle that Riverside Church has accomplished—a simple, small-town church in the largest city in the world; a friendly, gracious cordiality in an architectural setting suitable for a coronation.” Labeling herself as jaded toward most American Protestant churches after numerous trips to the Chartres Cathedral, she confesses that “in Riverside Church the old magic worked. . . . The first impression on entering the nave is a thrilling sense of beautiful proportions, a sense of symmetry and harmony of line and color.” She expresses particular consciousness during worship of the vaulted ceiling, the altar candles, and the stained glass windows. But amidst the beauty, she also writes of the people who had been shaped by their own experiences of the building, and who had thus shaped her own experience. Drawing on a Fosdick statement that God has “a near end and a far end,” she notes that the church staff seemed to recognize that about the building, too. “The staff is the near end of the church; the details of the architectural sources, the words of the by-laws, and the theological and other significances of the marble, wood, and glass form the far end. What matters more to the casual visitor to a church is the near end, the human-
contact end, and it matters a good deal.” The setting mattered and nurtured her spirit, but her interactions with people in that setting—her contacts with, for instance, members of the highly diversified ministry and social groups, or with the professional and efficiency-maximizing volunteer usher corps, in the modern religious skyscraper—were even more important, and her readership learned about both. Thus, Riverside’s physical structure, itself a medium for the broadcast of theological and social messages, was tied into further networks of mediation that projected it well beyond its local confines.

Religion and the Economics of Space: Riverside, Social Gospel Liberalism, and Class

As hinted at in the above discussions of soliciting pledges and justifying the building’s expense, an examination of Riverside’s physical space and the messages it broadcast must also consider financial aspects. If the Riverside structure embodied and embedded liberal Protestantism’s confidence in the adaptability of Christian tradition to new knowledges, seeking cultural relevance via a simultaneous conservation of the past and imagination of a future, its siting, construction, and upkeep likewise implicated it within the capitalist system of economic exchange. This is particularly evident in the narrative of John D. Rockefeller, Jr.’s process of seeking and purchasing initial space for the church site, purchasing and trading other lots in order to enhance the church’s frontage, and contracting with architectural firms to draft plans and submit bids. Rockefeller’s initial monetary contributions toward moving the church building from idea to reality totaled more than $10,500,000—half a million dollars more than public

103 As mentioned in note 25 above, helpful sources for this narrative are Miller, Harry Emerson Fosdick, 200-213 and Dolkart, Morningside Heights, 70-83.
relations expert Ivy Lee’s 1924 musings had projected, though Lee had figured the $10,000,000 cost for the building itself.\textsuperscript{104} As Lee had assumed, it would not have been possible to construct Riverside without recourse to the Rockefeller fortune; Riverside and capitalism are thus inextricably intertwined. This, however, is a truism, notable perhaps only for its scope, for Riverside is otherwise no different from any other building in terms of requiring capital. As Chidester and Linenthal put it, “Quite literally, sacred space can be bought and sold.”\textsuperscript{105}

Chidester and Linenthal go on to note a sense of ambivalence surrounding this fact, however. “Perhaps echoing a Protestant aversion to the buying and selling of sacred relics, benefices, or indulgences, many Americans have assumed that sacred space must be outside of the cycle of economic exchange. However, if all space is commodified . . . then sacred space cannot escape the economic forces of ownership and alienation.” Riverside evinces an expansion of the “Protestant aversion” that Chidester and Linenthal posit beyond discomfort with the sale of relics, however. An exchange involving Rockefeller, Jr., the Iconography Committee, and the chancel screen illustrates a wider Protestant conflictedness about the admixture of religion’s supposed purity and the decidedly more ambiguous realm of business. In the case of social gospel liberalism, especially, there was an uneasy coexistence of institution building, critique of capitalist excesses, and reliance upon capital to enable the institution building.

The planning stages of the chancel screen reflect this longstanding ambiguity in the social gospel movement, in which a Protestant impulse toward reform was financially dependent upon wealthy benefactors whose economic practices and interests wouldn’t

\textsuperscript{104} On Lee, see note 21 above.
\textsuperscript{105} Chidester and Linenthal, “Introduction,” 28.
necessarily seem congruent with social gospel ends. The tension bore particular resonance with dawning awareness of the Depression. In the case of the chancel screen, the feature had been a point of contention between the building committee, who thought a chancel screen would allow freer movement around the altar, and the architects, who sought to utilize a different design element. Cook recounts the final decision, made in 1930, when one of Riverside’s co-ministers, Rev. Eugene Carder, who was involved in all of the design discussions, acknowledged that, “the alternative proposal of a chancel screen treatment would cost a great deal more.” The matter was seemingly settled, except for the response of the building committee’s chairman—John D. Rockefeller, Jr.—who replied, “I thought you might feel that way, nevertheless, we’ll have the chancel screen.”

As with the acquisition of the church lot and a vast proportion of the total costs of building, the funding for the chancel screen and its constellation of visual messages would come from Rockefeller monies. At the same time, when the Iconography Committee proposed to include the figure of Rockefeller, Sr., Rockefeller, Jr. replied that, “I cannot tell you how deeply I appreciate the suggestion . . . which I know Father will be much touched by. . . . [Yet] I feel sure you will agree with me that it would be unwise to put any living man, particularly a capitalist, in the chancel screen.” The screen’s message was simultaneously timeless, insofar as it surpassed the historic boundaries of Christ’s ministry, and timebound, insofar as the inclusion of a living figure could compromise its message; it was also a capitalist-free liberal, social gospel, iconographic endeavor that was nonetheless made possible by capitalist fortune.

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107 Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick*, 212.
A further irony of the economics of religious space seen at Riverside was the challenge to hold together its capitalist benefaction and the broadly participatory ethic of its social gospel. Quite simply, the assumption that the building was Rockefeller’s church was in direct tension with Fosdick’s, Rockefeller’s, and church leadership’s goal of domesticating the space, creating a sense of joint venture, mission, and spiritual home. If part of the development of personality which Fosdick saw as key to social gospel’s functioning involved the dedication of the self to something greater, the Riverside building was meant to be a physical embodiment of that something greater; treating it as a wealthy man’s project undermined that. The church therefore employed several strategies by which it sought to embed the building’s economics into wider congregational life. The first of these was rhetorical and involved obscuring the extent of Rockefeller’s involvement. As Miller points out, the dollar amounts of Rockefeller’s initial contributions to erecting the building were hidden from the public at large and from much of the congregation. This involved a bit of rhetorical balance, for as the congregation faced the expense of their new structure, they needed both reassurance that the costs could be met and challenge to personally buy in. A pastoral letter sent to the “congregation and friends” of the Park Avenue Baptist Church did just this.\(^{108}\) It notes, on the one hand, that present sources of funding included $1.5 million from the sale of the Park Avenue building, along with an equal amount pledged by an unnamed member, the erection of a memorial tower for the carillon, gifts of memorial objects, and the pledge from a small group of members who had guaranteed remaining building expenses. Rockefeller’s gifts, of course, are obscured insofar as he was both the unnamed single

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\(^{108}\) Harry Emerson Fosdick, undated draft, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4A Box 1 Folder 1.
donor and the donor of the tower, whose portion of the building cost is not named. With these assurances, however, the task of inspiring a broad base of giving remained. To this end, the letter declaims the need for an endowment fund to sustain the many functions of the building “when we enter into the vastly larger field of service which our new location and equipment will involve.” Fosdick notes contributions and pledges already made for that purpose “in amounts from $1.00 to $100,000.00.” The letter closes by again deploying domestic language in the pursuit of economic ends, asserting that, “Our new church home can be the vital centre of religious life and influence in this city which we wish it to become only if each member of the church and congregation contributes of his means and his services as liberally as he is able.”

A second strategy involved tying the economics of the space directly into the utilization of the worship space. The archival record indicates that, while the construction process was underway, Riverside gave a great deal of thought to how best to handle seating. At Park Avenue, seating had been assigned through the use of pew rents—one consequence of which, given that only thirty percent or so of the membership showed up on a given Sunday even as Fosdick drew large numbers of visitors, was that many “regulars” ended up a distance from the pulpit while some of the “best seats” went to “casuals.” In addition to being unfair to the regulars, this was detrimental to the goal of “maintaining the family spirit of the church,” hindering the regulars’ ability to become better acquainted with each other through repeated proximity at worship.109 As early as 1928, Fosdick articulated another reason against the pew rent system: namely, that it “associates more favorable seats with higher prices, and less favorable seats with lower

109 Harry Emerson Fosdick, pastoral letter, May 17, 1930, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4A Box 1 Folder 1.
prices and so carries economic classification into the church and advertises it openly by
the graded location of the attendants.” 110 The congregation did give up the system of pew
rents in 1929, while worshiping in space lent to it by the Temple Beth-El synagogue—a
decision that carried economic implications. A bulletin that April bore a sidebar
explaining, “Speaking of a Democratic Church remember that we are voluntarily giving
up the pew rental system in the interest of that principle. This would take out $25,000.00
assured income. It would be a costly move if it were not for our confidence that the
‘democratic’ spirit of our people will absorb it in increased contributions.” 111 Religious
space was thus figured as manifesting national political ideals via sharing the burden of
the space’s economic costs.

Thirdly, in a move reminiscent of the home-to-church connection analyzed by
Orsi in regard to the festa of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, Riverside symbolically tied the
economics of its home space to the home spaces of its parishioners. One means of doing
this was through the distribution and utilization of envelopes in which parishioners could
contribute their offerings to the church. An untitled item in the March 1933 issue of The
Church Monthly includes a warmly lit photograph of a table upon which sits a lamp and a
small stack of worship books, with a box of offering envelopes features prominently
between them. The text urges readers “to take this very practical symbol into your home
where it will do more to guarantee the future of The Riverside Church in this community

110 Harry Emerson Fosdick, memorandum, 1928, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library
Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4A Box 1 Folder 1.
111 Church bulletin, April 14, 1929, Rockefeller Archive Center, Rockefeller Family Collection, Record
Group 2, Series N, Box 70, Folder 536. Pew rents had been the subject of debate in New York City for
a century, with the free church movement doing away with them as a reflection of the city’s class
stratification. See Kilde, When Church Became Theater, 26-29, and Charles C. Cole, Jr., “The Free
Church Movement in New York City,” New York History 34, no. 3 (July 1953): 284-297. Cashdollar, A
Spiritual Home, 166-173 considers use of and debate over pew rents in the Reformed tradition.
than any other means of support we have or ever will have. We cannot make this statement too strong. Give the envelopes a place on the mantelpiece!"\textsuperscript{112} The use of envelopes for planned, regular giving was well established in Protestant churches by this time, but Riverside’s mediated plea offers a prime example of constructing and solidifying a symbolic connection between home and church and the economic forces which enveloped each.

Efforts at encouraging a shared sense of economic responsibility for the building served in one sense as an attempt to deflect charges of Riverside being a church of and for the wealthy. At the same time as Fosdick hoped for his congregants to find a sense of personal spiritual respite and belonging to an enlarged spiritual family through their participation, he also aimed to gain a broader buy-in to the social gospel. His August 1929 pastoral letter reflects this. On the one hand, he contends, “We must not let ourselves be stared out of countenance by the size of our new building. Nothing matters except people; the only permanent values are in people; the only worth of any equipment lies in its effect on people; and from the first we must set ourselves to use our new building for people and not be wrongly impressed by its amplitude and splendor.” On the other hand, he asserts the simultaneous need “to stand for the social application of Christianity. No one will suspect us of being Bolshevik.” This latter statement reflects once again the imbrication of social gospel and capital; the implication here seems to be that the erection of a Gothic skyscraper with recourse to a significant amount of Rockefeller money allowed the congregation to stand within the mainstream of American culture, offering voices of internal critique. This made the responsibility to speak out

\textsuperscript{112}Church Monthly, March 1933, 91.
even greater, for “Jesus Christ, with his undisencourageable reverence for personality, never can be reconciled with evils that are still rampant in our economic, social, and international life. War, racial prejudice, the valuation of profits above manhood—such things are more explicit denials of Christianity than any heretical theology could ever be.” Thus the building itself symbolized a personal and social voice that the congregation as a whole needed to claim: “To the high mission of keeping the flame of Christian life alight in individuals and in society we should rededicate ourselves as we turn our faces toward our new church.”

As seen above, Fosdick’s pastoral letter in August 1930 highlights service as a means of justifying the expense of the building. In particular, with awareness of the Depression settling in, he gives voice to the social gospel value of tying the church’s work into a wider network of organized service. “I wonder how many of you have taken seriously the open doors we have set before you for giving through the church to the social service agencies of our community and the Christian work of the city and the world.” Yet, the view from the church tower might be suggested as a metaphor for Fosdick’s vision here—that is, a vision from above, gazing down on the city with doleful concern. He continues, “We have a heavy obligation on us—noblesse oblige—and there exists such popular expectation of service from us as will put us to shame if we fail in meeting it . . . The honor of our church is certainly involved in justifying our building by our usefulness.” To Fosdick, the building itself served in some sense as a signifier of the social gospel; a city and a world experiencing untrammed need saw in it a hopeful beacon, and would hold it accountable for that fact.

That social gospel, as reflected by his invocation of noblesse oblige, bore indelible class markers. Fosdick himself was long aware of this; he reflects in his autobiography, “I wish we could have been successful in including all economic and occupational classes in our congregation.” In particular, he names his regret that Riverside garnered “few representatives of labor unions,” and recalls “Albert Scott, then president of the Board of Trustees, deplores this situation, wishing we could somehow raze the barrier that commonly makes of our Protestant organizations in this sense ‘class’ churches.” That awareness could only have been sharpened by a letter that Fosdick received from a self-described “wharfe-rat.” It was undated and anonymous, but bears hallmarks of Depression-era poverty. The writer, who claims he “could misspell more languages fluently than any man,” ambles widely in his reflections, but offers a brief reminiscence of a visit to Riverside on a Sunday morning. “Last Sunday I went to church and saw the ushers disapproving glance. You see, my clothes were rumpled my face unshaved and the only reason I was permitted to stay was (I think) that I furnished the horrible example to that Godly throng who cast sly glances my way, no doubt thanking their God (whoever he be) that they and theirs were not as I.” To this visitor, the beauty of the church was not enough to overcome the consciousness of class differences that undercut the spiritual nurture it was supposed to offer. “The church was beautiful, a perfect symphony of flowers, and the setting was such as a Belasco might envy. . . . The music was wonderful and one forgot—a moment the reality of life, then one is rudly awaked and put properly in ones place by the clatection plate stuck accusingly under ones nose. Somehow I felt embarrassed and felt I had cheated when the dimes where not there to

115 Fosdick, *Living of These Days*, 199.
give.” He proffers that, “The sermon was a work of art deliverd by a trained pulpit orator who employed all the gestures of a trained dramatist, a golden flow of worlds a beautiful word picture that would make on think of a Rembrandt or a Rodin.” For all that, “The text of the sermon or what it was all about s[374x626]eemed unimportant, that lowly Son of Man seemed far away and he too, seemed unimportant in that brilliant crowd.” If the personalities representing personalism were unwelcoming, if the social actors embodying the social gospel reflected too strong a distinction from its presumed beneficiaries, then the very building which was supposed to manifest it could become oppressive.

An observation in the same autobiographical paragraph in which Fosdick bemoans Riverside’s lack of congregants who were laborers is telling. Having decried “the widespread idea that we are a group of wealthy folk” as “nonsense,” he describes the congregation as “for the most part, physicians, lawyers, social workers, students, teachers, civil servants, white-collar workers, various kinds of engineers, housewives, men and women in executive positions and in small businesses.” They were, in other words, primarily representative of the very professional middle class which McCarraher names as having been the social gospelers’ perceived drivers of social progress. That these comprised the bulk of Riverside’s congregation indicates that the building itself was broadcasting a set of religious meanings, and was being interpreted and shaped through a range of experiences which were largely congruent with those meanings, that resonated with these particularly classed parishioners. It was a skyscraper that simultaneously critiqued and legitimated the vertical urban society by placing the development of

116 Anonymous letter, undated, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2A Box 1 Folder 2.
117 Fosdick, Living of These Days, 199.
personal relationships at the center of its organizational ethos; a capitalist undertaking to critique capitalism, strengthening its moral core by using its funding to condemn its excesses; a Christian witness to the institutions around it which drew on their cultural capital in order to bolster its legitimacy; a city unto itself which sought to provide a home within the larger city; and a Protestant cathedral which claimed traditional mores for liberalism and aimed to enact the social gospel by keeping it respectable.
CHAPTER 5

PERSONALIZING THE SOCIAL: RIVERSIDE RESPONDS TO THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Introduction

On January 14, 1934, the National Broadcasting Company aired a symposium in which leaders representing various fields offered prognostications on the upcoming year. In the *New York Times* coverage of the event the following day, the paper noted a generally optimistic tone to the proceedings and provided excerpts from several of the addresses. The sole religious figure represented in the *Times*’ coverage was Harry Emerson Fosdick, who offered, according to the paper, five “specific religious responses to the present situation. 1. Better preaching. 2. More cooperation and less prejudice. 3. More active practical social service in the churches. 4. More care about interior, individual problems. 5. A fresh grasp on the social gospel and fresh courage in preaching it.”¹ That preaching both begins and ends Fosdick’s list is telling and unsurprising; he was well aware that a religious response to the crisis of the Depression required action, but that action was to be shaped discursively, arising from religious actors’ utilization of their respective expertise and energies as catalyzed and motivated through the preached word. The brief statement encapsulates the personal and the social elements that formed the dual emphases of Fosdick’s gospel, placing both within the context of homiletical pronouncement that attended to the hearer’s interior landscape while simultaneously enjoining congregational participation in expiating social ills. Fosdick’s distinction between the enactment of practical social service and the articulation of the social gospel

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suggests his keen awareness that relief and reform were not coterminous; the Depression necessitated immediate attention to human privation, but that was not one and the same with the larger societal work needed in order to prevent its recurrence. At the same time, practical social service was part and parcel of the social gospel’s work. It is highly significant that Fosdick nested his call for ecclesiastic attention to individual problems between these two elements, for it highlights his personalist conviction that the key to social transformation lay in tending to, and empowering, individuals.

Focus on the intertwined personal and social, so integral to Fosdick’s message in the Riverside Church and through his writing and broadcasting, also formed the backbone of the congregation’s response to the needs within and around it during the Depression. Fosdick worked into sermons his convictions regarding the abuses of the industrial system and its disregard for human personality, and the need for a chastened and reformed capitalism that would make human flourishing central; he also sought to simultaneously inspire his hearers to constructive action and to instill in them a vibrant sense of connection to God. Outside of his immediate tasks as a preacher, he offered his name and his energies in service to reform advocacy and unemployment relief. Likewise, within the framework of a broad program of benevolent giving, Riverside engaged in a local response to the crisis, initiating and participating in precisely the type of practical social service that Fosdick saw as crucial, attending to the interior, individual problems of the Depression’s victims as it did so.

It is this local response, Riverside’s enactment of a personalist social gospel amid economic crisis, to which I turn in this chapter. In what follows, I offer a brief account of the Depression’s impact in New York City, particularly as manifest in booming rates of
unemployment. I offer a sense of the general response to the crisis, situating Fosdick and Riverside within a larger dynamic of civic and religious engagement. I then analyze two programmatic responses made by the church—the Sewing Room and the Emergency Employment Service—as interrelated case studies of a congregation seeking to put its social gospel into practice. I aim, in part, to explore the class implications of a crisis response that aligned neatly with that spearheaded by the business and financial community. This will also entail paying attention to the fact that Fosdick’s social gospel rhetoric and public advocacy were on the whole bolder than the concrete actions undertaken by his congregation. And yet, I will also argue that these endeavors present an attempt by Riverside, not only to provide material relief, but also to restore individual dignity and to effect social change. In particular, Riverside conceived of itself as providing an ecclesiastic witness to public agencies, demonstrating what societal concern for human flourishing ought to look like at the institutional level. In short, the Riverside congregation acted on the personalist message of its preacher to enact the social gospel goal of transforming society through attention to the needs of individuals and to the functioning of institutions.

**Depression Settles In**

The Depression was a complex and multifaceted national and international phenomenon, with ramifications that impacted different demographic groups in various ways. In the American context, it is common to think of the postwar decade of the 1920s as a relatively stable and prosperous era, but rural areas of the United States did not experience it as such. American farmers, for instance, who had increased production to
meet global needs during the Great War, saw demand and prices plummet afterward; they struggled throughout the decade and became some of the hardest hit populations during the Depression. Even as the consumer economy was blossoming in the 1920s, both automobile and housing markets experienced sputters mid-decade. Nor were the differing impacts delimited geographically; within cities and locales, the impacts of the Depression fell unevenly. In New York City, the 1929 stock market crash, which most analysts describe as correlative with the Depression but definitively not causative, undoubtedly took a greater psychological toll on workers at the New York Stock Exchange than it did, for instance, on domestic workers; but the latter were far more likely to struggle with unemployment, to say nothing of more generally impoverished material conditions, than were the former during the Depression decade.²

The conditions that led to the stock market crash were certainly ripe for moral approbation. In 1927, the market underwent what then-Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover referred to as “an orgy of mad speculation” in which bonds and stocks became untethered from the realities of manufacturing and marketing goods and services.³ Manufacturers had stockpiles of unsold goods, but these didn’t keep stock prices from

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³ Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 35.
shooting upward, because money was cheap and therefore easy to obtain for further stock investment. This was largely a corporate phenomenon; Kennedy notes that, in 1928, perhaps only 2.5% of Americans owned stocks as individual investors. Rather, the “orgy” primarily derived from big corporations that had reaped large profits during the decade and diverted them to stock speculation rather than productive investments. This tendency of American capitalism, played out so starkly at the end of the 1920s, had been a social gospel concern from the movement’s formative days. Washington Gladden had inveighed against speculation in his 1886 *Applied Christianity*:

> What is the difference between the gambling practiced at a faro bank and the gambling practiced by those persons who buy and sell margins? One man bets another that ten thousand bushels of wheat will be worth so much at a certain future time; if it is selling in the market at that time for less than the price named, he agrees to pay the difference; if it is selling for more than the amount named, the other shall pay him the difference. Neither party owns a bushel of wheat; there is no transfer of merchandise; there is simply a transfer from the one man’s pocket to the other man’s pocket of the money won in the bet.

Indeed, if gambling has no redeemable value, at least “the men who play in gambling-houses only rob one another.” While all gamblers are “plunderers,” the gambler in the stock market bears the steeper moral cost, for “all his goods have been gained by the spoiling of his neighbors; it is not by cooperating with his fellow-men, but by preying upon them, that he has obtained” wealth.⁴

For those corporate gamblers, late 1929 ought to have been chastening. Stock prices broke unexpectedly in September, but quickly rebounded. On October 23, however, an avalanche of trading, with more than six million shares changing hands, led to the loss of $4 billion in paper value. The following day, “Black Thursday,” saw a

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record 12,894,650 shares traded after sell orders, with resulting losses of $9 billion dollars. Days later on October 29, “Black Tuesday,” 16,410,000 shared were traded. A pall was cast on the stock market such that, by the middle of November, $26 billion, or roughly one third of the value of stocks on record in September, had disappeared. All the same, while the crash was a disaster for many individual investors, their numbers were small enough that any wider impact was blunted. Stocks recovered approximately twenty percent of their losses by April 1930, no major corporation failed, and the pattern of speculation which diverted money from production continued.⁵

A full accounting of the causes and scope of the Depression is well beyond the purview of this project, though it may be shorthanded as comprising some combination of reckless economic practices in the United States in conjunction with global factors that may be tied back into the peace conditions forced upon Germany after World War I. What is undeniable is that the Depression had dire effects across the nation. Farm earnings, which were already low at $6 billion in 1929, had dropped to $2 billion in 1932. Between the crash and the bank rescue initiated by Franklin Delano Roosevelt when he began his first presidential term in March 1933, more than five thousand banks failed across the country, erasing some $7 billion dollars worth of investments. And the number of home foreclosures bounded upward annually, with 150,000 properties foreclosed on in 1930, 200,000 in 1931, and 250,000 in 1932.⁶

In the face of what Kennedy, following numerous historians and contemporaries, refers to as Americans’ “odd apathy” in the face of Depression, the issue that seemed to

⁵ Kennedy, Freedom from Fear, 35-39.
⁶ Ibid., 162-164.
hit most forcefully home and arouse calls for federal action was unemployment. The numbers were bleak. Statistics compiled by the United States Department of Commerce indicate that unemployment was quite low in 1929, but that it ballooned over the next four years, reaching a high mark of 25.2 percent in 1933. The numbers were even starker when the data set was limited to the nation’s nonfarm labor force, with annual unemployment totals for that group reaching well beyond thirty percent by 1932. Unemployment in the nonfarm labor force didn’t drop below twenty-one percent until 1941; a wartime economy held nonfarm unemployment in the single digits thereafter.

Kennedy projects that one-third of the labor force was working part-time, resulting in nearly “half of the nation’s human workpower . . . going unutilized.” Many of those who continued to earn paychecks nonetheless found them to be smaller. Nor was the suffering equal: roughly one-fifth of those on federal relief rolls were African American, a proportion nearly double African American representation within the general population.

Such a high proportion of the citizenry suffering from joblessness was unparalleled in the nation’s history, and there was real concern that unemployment was becoming a permanent structural reality.

Widespread calls for a federal response to rampant unemployment gained traction in 1932, and formed one contributing factor to Herbert Hoover’s loss to Franklin Delano Roosevelt in that year’s presidential election. Kennedy points out, however, that, Hoover’s limited-federal government philosophy notwithstanding, he had few options;

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7 Ibid., 90. The phrase, while useful to an extent, also obscures a great deal; for instance, the individuals at the center of Gellman and Roll’s narrative in The Gospel of the Working Class demonstrated nothing that could be rightfully characterized as apathetic.
9 Kennedy, Freedom from Fear, 164, 87.
the federal government in 1930 lacked adequate infrastructure and mechanisms for
disbursing unemployment relief, which had up to then been seen as the responsibility of
state and local governments. Hoover’s response to the crisis relied on the principle of
voluntarism as a means of stimulating state and local spending for unemployment relief.
He instituted this via his creation in October 1930 of the President’s Emergency
Committee for Employment, which the New York Times reported that month “planned to
shift all direct relief work back to the communities where the needs arise, and it is
expected that cooperation by local or State organizations will aid materially.”
10 The initial committee was dissolved in April 1931 and succeeded by the President’s
Organization on Unemployment Relief. This latter organization bore a New York City
connection, as it was headed by AT&T president Walter S. Gifford, who was also the
chair of the city’s Charity Organization Society. To an extent, the tactic was successful.
Kennedy reports that, “Municipal government payments for relief in New York City, for
example, rose from $9 million in 1930 to $58 million in 1932. New Yorkers’ private
charitable giving increased from $4.5 million in 1930 to $21 million in 1932.” This was
impressive, but not nearly enough. “Though those figures testified to the compassion of
City Hall and the perhaps surprisingly soft hearts of individual New Yorkers, they were
pathetically inadequate. Combined public and private relief expenditures of $79 million
in New York City for the entire year of 1932 amounted to less than one month’s loss of
wages for the eight hundred thousand New Yorkers out of work.”

Kennedy is perhaps himself a bit too uncharitable in his surprise over New
Yorkers’ level of private giving to the cause of unemployment relief. While his point that

11 Kennedy, Freedom from Fear, 88.
private and municipal outlays were insufficient to address the scope of need remains invaluable, the details beneath his passing reference to New York’s relief efforts paint a fascinating picture of a city struggling to mobilize and meet the pressing need that confronted it. These were efforts that included the significant involvement of religious institutions and agents, some of them acting out of their formation in the social gospel mold. As Paul A. Carter argued in his mid-twentieth century study of the social gospel as presented via denominational presses, in contrast to the relative social gospel complacency evident at the end of the 1920s, the rhetoric in the 1930s “was so far beyond the sterile social vs. individual gospel debate of the 20’s that it begins to appear that the depression was not so much the cause as the opportunity for the Social Gospel to come to maturity.”

The pages of the New York Times in the early 1930s bear this out, depicting a fabric of relief efforts that included religious commentary, critique, and activity. The facts on the ground were desolate. In March 1930 testimony before the Senate Commerce Committee, New York State Industrial Commissioner Frances Perkins asserted that economic conditions in the state had grown drastically and progressively worse since the prior October, and that unemployment had reached levels not seen since the recession of 1913-1914. She also noted that appeals to charity had increased by two hundred percent over the prior six months. On March 24, the Times reported on the breadline at the Protestant Episcopal Church of the Transformation, familiarly known as the Little Church Around the Corner. The article stated that the church had distributed 10,515 meal tickets over the prior week, along with 598 tickets for beds for homeless men. The minister, Rev. Dr. Randolph Ray, used that week’s sermon to appeal for

employers and others who knew of jobs to notify the church so that they could help
connect jobless people to work; he noted that, as the congregation assembled for worship
that Sunday morning, some 1,300 unemployed men had been given meal tickets. The
weekly total increased to 15,000 the following week. In May, the New York Chapter of
the American Red Cross reported that, in January through April, it had seen an eight
hundred percent increase over the same period from the year before in applications for
home service, which were “attributed to the aggravation of nervous and mental disorders
resulting from unemployment.” By November, the scope of hunger was growing rapidly;
the Mayor’s Unemployment Committee distributed 450 tons of food at police stations
throughout the city, but more people with tickets for the food arrived than could actually
be accommodated.13

While the developing picture of human need and hardship through 1930 was bad,
things only continued to get worse. In March 1931, the Research Bureau of New York
City’s Welfare Council released the results of a survey showing that there had been
750,000 full-time workers out of work in December 1930, and a similar number still out
of work that February. They projected that, counting only those who would normally
have been employed full-time, approximately 18.5 percent of the city labor force was out
of work; including part-time workers raised that figure to approximately 25 percent.
Further, they estimated that the aggregate loss in wages by those who would normally
have been employed stood at $18,750,000 per week, or $80,000,000 each month.

Eighteen months later, New York City’s Health Department found that more than one in

March 31, 1930; “Pleas to Red Cross Gain,” New York Times, May 26, 1930; “450 Tons of Food Given
five of the city’s school children were suffering from malnutrition. That same month, Acting Mayor Joseph V. McKee announced the results of a survey conducted by city police indicating that “about one person in seven in the city is either out of a job or dependent upon someone who is unemployed.”

New York’s Religious Community Responds

Before examining the work that Fosdick and his Riverside congregation undertook in response to the economic chaos and human need around them, it is important to gain a sense of the overall endeavors engaged in by the city’s larger community of religious actors. The brief sketch that follows is far from exhaustive, but will help to contextualize Riverside’s efforts among broader religious activities, both generically considered and as particularly rooted in the social gospel tradition. This will help, in the analysis of Riverside’s projects, to bring into relief the shared framework within which they acted, along with the unique contributions they sought to make.

In the Depression’s early months, religious bodies and their members began mobilizing to address the crisis of unemployment. Appeals from religious leaders to congregants comprised one prominent method by which this occurred. In late March 1930, the Social Welfare Committee of the Greater New York Federation of Churches, a body which functioned as a local version of the Federal Council of Churches, sent a special request to more than 1,100 preachers “to urge members of their respective congregations to aid in giving immediate relief to the large number of unemployed.” But such homiletic statements about unemployment were not a one-time event. Fosdick

occasionally gained coverage for turning his Sunday morning post at Riverside into a bully pulpit. One article notes him as being “one of many clergymen who discussed the unemployment problem from their pulpits in response to the call [for] setting the day for observance as Unemployment Sunday.” The article describes Fosdick as backing unemployment insurance and reorganization of industry on the basis of “cooperative control and social planning,” arguing that recurring problems indicated something wrong with the industrial system, and asserting that “this evil will not be cured until all basic industries are socialized and production directed with an eye to social need rather than to private profit.” Nor were such sermonic pronouncements merely Protestant discursive territory, which the Times highlighted by sampling interfaith addresses as it did in an article featuring Lutheran Rev. Felix G. Robinson criticizing the commercialism of both employer and employee, Rev. Henry F. Hammer of St. Patrick’s Cathedral proclaiming that the Depression was not a sign that God had turned away from laborers, and Rabbi Stephen Wise calling the crisis a tragedy comparable to the World War.15

Religious actors, predominantly leaders of congregations and institutions, also engaged in applying public pressure on elected officials. In March 1930, the National Unemployment League presented an appeal to President Hoover that formed the template for the Greater New York Federation of Churches’ above-mentioned request to preachers to address unemployment during worship services. The statement, noting that millions of workers across the country were unemployed, contended that

Employment is the structural necessity of the modern industrial world. When our constantly recurring periods of business depression, with the

accompanying unemployment of millions of workers for months and sometimes years at a time arise, they bring not only anxiety, hunger and misery to those who are thrown out of work but they break down the industrial machine itself, and in their train follow the permanent deterioration of the worker in body and mind; increased sickness demands upon our hospitals and charitable institutions, and finally crime waves and other forms of disorder which menace the security of society.

The statement is significant for its immediate content—but doubly so for the way it illustrates the iteration of the social gospel within a broader context than denominational bodies. The social gospel movement never had a monopoly on concern for the public good, but the rhetoric arguing for the irreducible intertwining and interdependence of social and individual in industrial society—in short, the appeal to a social soul—issuing from an organization that did not identify itself by a religious moniker, is unmistakably shaded with social gospel ideology. Indeed, Fosdick was one of six vice presidents of the League, as was fellow New Yorker and radio personality, Congregationalist minister S. Parkes Cadman. Notable social gospeler Charles Stelzle was also a League officer, and the League’s proposed solution offers some evidence that the social gospel provided at least one strand of influence on what would become the New Deal: the statement called for turning “this displaced labor into channels of public improvements, creating a network of roads throughout the country; projects of afforestation, and drainage and irrigation of waste lands, and the development of water power.”16

For all of the critique of the industrial system issued by groups aligned within the social gospel heritage, however, it was clear that they, along with many other religious actors, conceived of a large, even primary, role for business in providing unemployment relief. Fosdick himself was known to preach that the very minds who had created the

conditions which led to the Depression had an obligation to throw their energies into solving it. Further, it was one thing to criticize “industry” as an abstract entity, but quite another to demonize its particular members, many of whom might be found in church pews on Sunday morning. In fact, in the case of New York City’s Emergency Employment Committee, which formed in October 1930, it seems that many religious actors and institutions were happy to follow as business led in relief.

On October 16, 1930, the *New York Times* reported on a meeting of financial and business executives who aimed to provide at least $150,000 per week throughout the winter as payroll for ten thousand unemployed men who were heads of families in Manhattan and the Bronx. The executives, under the leadership of Bankers Trust Company chair Steward Prosser, would raise the money for distribution through the Charity Organization Society and the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor. The Charity Organization Society had already arranged with the Department of Parks to fund three thousand to five thousand workers for the park service, who would be paid fifteen dollars per week, “the lowest wage charity organizations consider possible for a family to live in New York.” The campaign was thus designed as a partnership between public and private entities, directed toward the alleviation of mental and physical suffering of men who could not provide for their families, and to ameliorate those families’ deprivations. Prosser himself recognized it as a stopgap effort, issuing a statement that simultaneously deployed the notion of both private and governmental responsibilities and evoked an optimism that voluntaristic efforts could relieve the suffering borne of Depression. “The committee is, of course, aware that its [fundraising] efforts cannot meet the situation entirely,” he confessed. “It is our hope that municipal,
State and national authorities will do their utmost to carry on a program of new public works which will open up new sources of employment and that all employers, whether corporations, firms, or individuals, will also accept their responsibilities by maintaining as complete payrolls as possible.”

The business community-driven committee acted as an impetus for some religious actors in the city, Fosdick among them. In mid-November 1930, it put out a request for clergy to observe the fourteenth as “Unemployment Sunday.” According to the Times, “The committee has informed the ministers it believes they can effectively serve by emphasizing the importance of prompt action and by urging their parishioners to support the various agencies—Catholic, Jewish, Protestant and non-sectarian—organized to deal with relief.” It also produced and sent out a pamphlet entitled, “What About This Man?” which told “the story of unemployment in the city and the plans being made to meet the problem.” The social gospel dynamic underwent a moment of reversal, then, in which clergy who sometimes offered sermonic comment about social problems sparked by industry abuses were told by the business community how they could be most helpful. The Emergency Employment Committee dispatched religious leaders to make the moral case for relief. Response was favorable, and by midweek it had raised its fundraising goal to $6,000,000. Two weeks later, it had increased that aim to $8,000,000.

By the following fall, reflecting the long-term nature of the crisis, the Emergency Employment Committee had been renamed the Emergency Unemployment Relief Committee. In October, the business and financial world once again drew representatives

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of the religious field into the general relief effort, announcing “the appointment of a
subcommittee of clergymen to assist in its campaign . . . to finance jobs and home relief
for unemployed heads of families and ‘white collar’ workers.” The subcommittee was an
interfaith endeavor, meant to reach a wide swath of the city’s population, with prominent
representatives of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish congregations and bodies. Fosdick
was part of this group, which also included such religious luminaries as Institutional
Synagogue’s Rabbi Herbert S. Goldstein, Roman Catholic Cardinal Patrick J. Hayes, the
Right Rev. Thomas E. Molloy, Bishop of Brooklyn, Episcopal Bishop William Manning,
Methodist bishop and social gospeler Rev. Francis J. McConnell, and S. Parkes
Cadman.19

As suggested by their commissioning of religious leaders, the Emergency
Unemployment Relief Committee was interested in reaching beyond the business field
and drawing New Yorkers of all stripes into the relief effort. To that end, former New
York State Governor (and failed 1928 presidential candidate) Al Smith directed a ten-
day, block-to-block canvass in order to solicit funds for the campaign. The Times
reported “an army of more than 15,000” volunteers, “said to be the largest ever
assembled in peacetime for such a task,” would be deployed, going house to house
soliciting money from wage earners in exchange for a badge proclaiming, “I have
shared,” showing the donor’s support for the unemployed. Smith framed the campaign in
terms of privilege and duty, arguing that, “Providing relief and assistance for the
unemployed is the duty of every person who has a job or an income. It is not only a duty
but a privilege. . . . The privilege of sharing should not be confined to a few and we are

19 “Job Relief Group Maps Survey Here,” New York Times, September 1, 1931; “Smith to Lead 15,000 in
going to give every New Yorker an opportunity to do his duty.” To that end, Manhattan was divided into seven territories for canvassing, with volunteers to be recruited from clubs, churches, associations, and fraternal and political organizations. Each of the seven areas would be further organized under a “territorial commander,” which Fosdick was named for the Upper West Side. Of those seven, Fosdick was the only figure named who represented a religious body.²⁰

The canvass met with success, and Fosdick and the network of institutions on Morningside Heights threw themselves into it with gusto; Fosdick’s Upper West Side territory canvassing group included faculty and students from City College, Union Theological Seminary, Jewish Theological Seminary, and the social service department of Our Lady of Lourdes Church, and received more individual relief subscriptions than any of the other territories. Two Fosdick connections also proved quite fruitful to the campaign: John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and his father gave a one million dollar gift toward the fundraising goal, and Fosdick friend and admirer, the philanthropist Edward S. Harkness, offered an additional $750,000. The Rockefellers added a second gift less than two weeks later, pledging $500,000 outright with up to an additional $250,000 tied to further fundraising benchmarks. City clergy backed the canvass with another “Unemployment Sunday,” using worship services to appeal for relief and to take special collections. The Times reprinted statements from several clergy who had pledged to support “Unemployment Sunday” and to uphold the work of the committee. Among them was Fosdick, who characterized the committee as representing “in organized form the determination of New York City that nobody here shall starve this next Winter;”

²⁰ “Smith to Lead 15,000 in Relief Canvass.”
celebrated “the wholehearted cooperation of all portions of our population, representing all faiths and churches,” and exhorted that “New York City must organize its neighborliness and see to it that the burden of poverty is lifted from those upon whom temporarily it has fallen.”

While the block canvass was successful—enough so that it would be repeated the following year, again with clergy support and involvement—the numbers must also be held in perspective, hearkening again to Kennedy’s observation about the scale of need in the face of voluntary charitable response. Certainly, there were very generous individual donors, the Rockefellers among them. The house-by-house effort netted $694,379, which paled in comparison to the $6,750,000 raised through the committee’s Commerce and Industry Division. Yet, in an odd turn, the business-driven committee sent a representative to a religious audience to talk about the need for religious relief agencies to create jobs. William H. Matthews, head of the Emergency Work and Relief Bureau, the Emergency Unemployment Relief Committee’s job placement agency, projected that all groups cooperating with the committee needed to create a total of fifty thousand jobs in order to avert disaster that winter. Three weeks later, the bureau had reached 110,290 applicants for employment, and had to end registration at its fifty district offices, which would continue to distribute information on relief sources. The Women’s Division of the Emergency Unemployment Relief Committee subsequently recommended a plan of family adoption, seeking “to interest individuals, families, clubs or other groups in the

needs of particular families in distress because of the long continued unemployment of the breadwinner.” The irony is clear: Fosdick and other religious actors had been drawn into efforts of moral suasion for a solution based on charitable voluntarism that was clearly inadequate to meet the ongoing need.22

**Fosdick’s Activism: A Personalist Preacher Lives the Social Gospel**

As has been seen above, Fosdick was a prominent figure within the network of religious actors, particularly institutional leaders, responding to the unemployment crisis. He readily lent his status as Riverside’s preacher to the cause of relief and to critique of the economic system and myopic nationalism that had brought about the Depression in the first place. He addressed both elements rhetorically, in sermons and addresses, upholding employment relief by participating in the Emergency Unemployment Relief Committee’s “Unemployment Sundays”—which the *Times* referred to in 1932 as “Unemployment Sabbath,” noting that the event would be observed in both churches and synagogues—and by using his pulpit and its print and broadcast extensions to argue for greater social justice. At an address that opened a fundraising campaign for the Henry Street Visiting Nurse Service, also broadcast over radio, Fosdick labeled starvation as the greatest threat to patriotism, and drew on social gospel language of universal brotherhood to inspire both charitable giving and greater equality: “If we have, as we probably will have, 10,000,000 unemployed, that may mean perhaps millions more living in distress or under the shadow of economic insecurity. That is the most serious business this nation has ever faced in your day or mine. . . . If we will not learn from the Hebrew prophets and

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from Jesus that we are all brethren, then we would better learn it from scarlet fever and from infantile paralysis.”

Further sermonic examples abound, but two will be sufficiently illustrative. In “The Ghost of a Chance,” preached at Riverside on December 28, 1930, Fosdick declared that capitalism as an economic system and way of life was facing judgment in the crisis. “Our whole capitalistic society is on trial; first within itself, for obviously there is something the matter with the operation of a system that over the Western world leaves millions upon millions of people out of work who want work and millions more in the sinister shadows of poverty. Second, capitalism is on trial with communism for its world competitor.” He wondered whether capitalism could “move out from its old individualism, dominated by the selfish profit-motive, and so create a new co-operative epoch with social planning and social control, that it can serve, better than it has, the welfare of all the people?” This, he was certain, would require “a rebirth of public spirit, a renaissance of spiritual life and ethical Christianity that will issue in social-mindedness.” And in an April 1932 sermon covered by the Times, Fosdick offered analysis of the Depression’s roots and advocated general measures by which he hoped for improvement: “Back of our present destitution is a war for which there was no need, debts that never can be paid, tariffs which kill the very trade on which recovery depends, a socially unplanned, individualistic economic life utterly unfitted to the modern world of massed production and a narrow nationalism such as keeps the United States from going even into the World Court.” He went on, as he had in the earlier sermon, to berate the movers of capitalism for having “put our brains into making money for ourselves out of

the capitalistic system, instead of giving commensurate thought to solving the social problems which the capitalistic system has produced.” Yet he hoped for a less capricious system of economic planning that would arise out of the crisis.24

It’s worth noting that Fosdick’s assessment of the Depression as an adjudication of illness within capitalism did not consign him to the realm of radicalism; indeed, Floyd L. Carlisle, chairman of the board of the New York Edison, Consolidated Gas, and Niagara-Hudson Power Companies, himself told 275 executives and employees organizing fundraising work for the Emergency Unemployment Relief Committee’s utilities group that, if response during the winter of 1932-1933 was not greater than ever before, it would “come close to meaning that the capitalistic system had broken down.” Yet, where Carlisle hoped to increase giving by individuals because he feared over-reliance on governmental aid, Fosdick aimed for a capitalism that would accommodate a “drawing [of] the basic industries of our nation together in co-operative planning under wise social control” such that it could “become a servant of the people.” Here he voiced publicly in the face of the Depression a social gospel that sat firmly within the realm of Gladden’s articulations.25

Drawing on his stature as head of a prominent congregation, Fosdick engaged in political activism for a number of causes related directly to addressing particular conditions brought about by the Depression. As noted above, he was one of six vice presidents of the National Unemployment League, which appealed to President Hoover in

March 1930 for a public works program. That fall, he was numbered among “Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish clergymen [who] joined . . . in an appeal to voters to support a $50,000,000 bond issue for State institutions.” He helped form a Citizens’ Emergency Committee to aid striking dressmakers and tailors formerly employed by the Couturiers’ Association, publicly condemning “a policy of ruthlessness at a time when every effort of the community is bent to prevent unemployment.” In March 1931, he was elected a vice chair of a council which recommended a number of legislative proposals related to unemployment to Governor Roosevelt. In 1932, he headed a group of twenty-one clergy who lobbied the United States Senate on behalf of striking Kentucky coal miners. After Roosevelt’s election as President, he joined “a coalition committee of different groups and political and religious faiths,” petitioning state governors around the country to join a public proclamation of support, “thus enabling the whole people to declare in unison their confidence and faith in our President.” He participated in a committee of religious and civic leaders who held open hearings designed to call public attention to the large number of evictions of unemployed families, as well as serving on the Emergency Committee for Tenement Safety, which urged passage of four bills to make housing safer in New York City.²⁶

Nor do the above examples exhaust the scope or range of Fosdick’s public activism.²⁷ It is highly significant, as well, that Fosdick engaged in these public positions


²⁷ For more on social gospel themes in Fosdick’s preaching and writing, see chapter 1; for a broad look at
and activities as a representative of the Protestant establishment and of the wider religious institutional community of New York City; “Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick, The Riverside Church,” carried broader and deeper implications on a petition, in a list of committee members, or in a news report of a public action than Fosdick’s name alone would have, were he able to disarticulate his identity as a private citizen from his institutional associations. It allowed Fosdick to speak and act with the implicit assumption that his actions were buttressed by the weight of parishioners behind them; indeed, the archival record contains the occasional letter from a parishioner who disagreed with one of Fosdick’s public stances or utterances, at least one of whom ended up leaving the church. The converse is thus also true: Fosdick’s public activities and statements, along with their coverage in the news, simultaneously encouraged his parishioners (and, presumably, the members of his reading and radio audiences) to think seriously about public issues in the light of the Christian faith he espoused and allowed them to participate vicariously. They were in some sense involved because their pastor was involved.

This was not a new phenomenon. In a study of New York City’s evangelical Protestants in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Matthew Bowman argues compellingly that liberal evangelicals—that group in which Fosdick included himself—came to view social action as a vital enactment of faith, moving worship and its soul-shaping impetus beyond the bounds of the Sunday morning service. That is, as the wider acceptance of higher criticism of the Bible and of various scientific knowledges made the literal words of the Bible unstable, the liberal evangelicals who helped drive and give

Fosdick’s political convictions and activities, see Miller, Harry Emerson Fosdick, 449-547.
shape to the social gospel movement, in particular, developed contours of religious
behavior that shifted worship from modes of hearing to modes of action, both within and
without the sanctuary. “In New York City by the turn of the century, faith would now
come by doing: the Word no longer embodied in speech, but in behavior,” argues
Bowman. “New York’s evangelical Christians . . . understood their efforts to relieve the
suffering of the poor, to aid in the integration of immigrants, to fight prostitution and
drunkenness and child delinquency, not merely in terms of social reform or cultural
uplift, but as liturgy: rituals of conversion which would draw both the reformer and the
reformed into the orbit of the Word enacted.”28 The social gospel that found its
articulation in the preached word found further embodiment through the engagement of
its hearers with social issues outside of the church doors.

Bowman further asserts that personalism played a significant role in this shift.
Pointing to romanticism’s role in the development of evangelicalism in general and its
liberal variant in particular, he contends that, “Fascination with the human personality led
[evangelicals] to emphasize the potential of personal influence to sway a sinner toward
conversion, and to transform the minister from a translucent channel to an opaque
incarnation of the Word of God.”29 The minister, in this formulation, lost the
boundedness of the sanctuary and the study, and was looked to for far more than a
propounding of scriptural exegesis; the minister as inspirational and heroic figure had to
develop a keen awareness of the world in which parishioners lived and moved, had to
himself move about that world with purpose and intentions for its betterment, had to

28 Matthew Bowman, “The Urban Pulpit: Evangelicals and the City in New York, 1880-1930” (PhD
29 Ibid., 188.
speak and act in ways that would empower and enable parishioners to enact the liturgy of social engagement. Thus was Fosdick’s public presence not only part and parcel of his pastoral persona; it was a means by which his preaching became further enlivened within the lives of his Riverside congregation. And it helped to fuel the congregation’s practical response to the suffering around and within it.

**Riverside’s Benevolence Program: “Expressing the Spirit of Unselfishness”**

In 1938, Riverside’s business manager, George Heidt, described for John D. Rockefeller, Jr. what he characterized as three phases of the church’s benevolent giving program. While still in the Park Avenue building, the congregation directed the largest portion of its benevolence monies to the Northern Baptist Convention, as well as making donations to various other Baptist organizations. Beginning with the 1930-1931 fiscal year, as they inhabited their new building, Riverside substantially increased their benevolent giving “by adding gifts to many community objects.” The church’s benevolence program became even more differentiated after 1935, when they opted to stop giving to the convention and thus exercise greater control over who received their gifts. The church’s archives reflect a period of creation, study, and refinement of processes and committees meant to move toward increased efficiency through greater centralization of information and better record keeping. A 1937 report offered an evaluation and “a new sense of direction.” It also included the conviction that

The benevolence program of the Riverside Church is but one of the many activities which make up the total program of the Church. Easily the benevolences are viewed too narrowly as constituting a list of agencies—a service outside the Church through gifts of money by members to deserving enterprises. But a satisfactory and effective program of benevolences involves much more than that; it involves the education and
interpretation within the Church—to the end that the spirit of benevolence among the members may be encouraged, that opportunities for expressing the spirit of unselfishness and Christian stewardship may be effectively presented, and that a greater degree of voluntary cooperation and giving by members may be secured.

In other words, benevolence giving was meant to be both a part of and a step into a wider engagement with the world that was part of the Christian life. Annual pledging to the church’s philanthropic endeavors was meant as a starting point, rather than an ending point, to an active faith life. In the benevolence program, members had the opportunity to financially support social services meant to promote human flourishing—and through the regular communications regarding the church’s benevolence program, they learned more concretely some of the outcomes of their support and thus received encouragement to continue giving. In some cases—such as with the regular articles in *The Church Monthly* about the phalanx of volunteers who helped the church’s various unemployment relief programs, or the published updates of the service endeavors and opportunities of the Women’s Society—they were pointed toward ways in which they could actively participate. As Judith Weisenfeld has concisely expressed, “Riverside’s members also maintained strong connections with these [benevolent] organizations through both volunteer and paid service, demonstrating their commitment to practicing their Christian beliefs to improve social conditions.”

Fosdick expanded on this in October 1947, slightly more than a year after his retirement from Riverside’s pastorate, when he wrote, at Rockefeller’s request, a thirty-

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six page document entitled “The Policy and Program of the Riverside Church.” It was intended, not for publication, but as a response to various members of church boards who hoped to receive a summation of his impressions of the philosophy behind the church’s organization and policies as a touchstone to help guide them through the period of congregational transition. Upon completing the document, Fosdick delivered it to Rockefeller, who then distributed it to the church’s ministers, deacons, trustees, and officers of church organizations. It is a fairly wide-ranging text, but handily addresses the sense of responsibility engendered by the grandiose church facilities, and conveys the church’s intention to blend the best aspects of the personable country church and the expansive ministries of the institutional church. While it is undeniably retrospective in nature, “The Policy and Program of the Riverside Church” accurately consolidates the approach to service both within and outside of its walls that the congregation followed throughout the decade of the Depression. As such, it provides a useful lens through which to regard Riverside’s program of benevolent giving and activity.

After providing a brief historical overview and addressing the church’s philosophy of an open membership, Fosdick notes Riverside’s urban location, drawing a point of connection between his congregation and every other church similarly situated, insofar as “on every side of every metropolitan church is need—physical, financial, psychological, spiritual.” Among those categories of need, Fosdick names in particular loneliness, mental sickness, unemployment, children needing care and recreation, young men and women wanting fellowship, adults wanting work in Arts and Crafts, and others with gifts they needed to express and exercise. In addressing those needs, however, Fosdick recounts that the church did not adopt a top-down view of implementation, “did
not so much impose a prearranged program on the community, as ask the community what it wanted from us— with results that surprised us. One area of our program after another came into being not because with foresight we planned it, but because the community, organizing itself under our roof, created it.” Among the examples he offers is the Arts and Crafts Department, which started with the intention of serving children but expanded as a therapeutic means of dealing with the emotional stress of the Depression’s tortured economics.31

Fosdick depicts Riverside and its members as sharing the widespread condition among those on Morningside Heights of being “troubled in conscience” over the disparities between their neighborhood and the adjacent community of Harlem. “Immediately adjoining one of the greatest galaxies of religious and educational institutions in the world, to have a neighborhood— twenty-four nationalities attending its public school— cursed by deplorable housing, inadequate play space, neglected childhood, racial conflict and all the other makings of juvenile delinquency and gangsterism, is intolerable.” Yet, in a statement that could likewise apply to Fosdick’s own Depression-era relief and advocacy activities, he characterizes the church as working collaboratively rather than unilaterally, maintaining that, “What we have done has been to select the most efficient organizations engaged in service to the neighborhood and to make them objects of primary importance in our benevolence budget.” Implicit in this assessment are standards of middle class professionalism that were woven throughout so much social gospel activism, but also an abiding conviction that, for the church’s

31 Harry Emerson Fosdick, “The Policy and Program of the Riverside Church,” unpublished, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Series 4A Box 2 Folder 12, 8.
members and adherents, all engagement in activity that served the social good was religious in nature; as Weisenfeld has described it, and as will be seen clearly in the case studies which follow, Riverside’s cooperation with the other institutions on Morningside Heights simultaneously demonstrates both “these elite institutions’ paternalistic control of the neighborhood” and “the church’s strong commitment to participate fully in the life of the community.” Fosdick ties this back into his personalist philosophy, for, “At the center of the philosophy behind Riverside Church is the essential Christian idea that the most valuable thing we know is personality.” As such, a repeated mantra at staff meetings was, “nothing matters here except what happens to individuals.” If the social structures that formed the object of social gospel concern were at heart an amalgam of collected individuals, then every church-centered interaction, from pastoral counseling of parishioners to relationships developed in church organizations to the compassionate personal assistance furnished to clients of the church’s Social Service Department, was potentially redemptive. As Fosdick stated it, attention to the individual brings the social into relief as a vital realm for religious activity, for “It is our care for individuals . . . that makes us eager in our own neighborhood to do something effective about the deplorable environment that ruins so many of them.”

Even prior to the 1935 decision to stop directing the bulk of their benevolence monies through the Northern Baptist Convention, Riverside engaged in a robust program of directed giving. The April 1931 issue of The Church Monthly included a number of items related to the upcoming fiscal year, beginning that May. One item noted that budgeting was structured such that benevolence giving was equal in amount to church

expenses. Another asserted that the church was “doing a very large share of our missionary and charitable work through established agencies for which we are not independently responsible,” and contended that, “A study of the benevolence budget will at a glance show how the broader field of our interest is being expressed in the list of agencies through which we are cooperating . . . philanthropic projects of the undenominational or sectarian type which are receiving direct and definite aid.” The Monthly reinforced the symmetry of benevolence and general budgets two years later, indicating a benevolence target in 1933 that “means that we are proposing to give away this year to the various outside projects a sum equal to that which we have to raise through pledges for current expense.” The following year’s budgeting process demonstrated that ideal and reality were becoming more difficult to match up: while the Monthly indicated the need for a total of $130,878 in pledges to meet church expenses, and while a church meeting expressed the goal of matching that in benevolences—down from the prior year’s total of $145,000—the official benevolence total voted into the budget was $90,000. The Depression had hit home in the church budget. Still, the budget also provided opportunities for addressing the Depression. Two such efforts, separate though related, form the subject of the remainder of this chapter.33

The Emergency Employment Service and the Sewing Room

The Riverside Church, through the public leadership and involvement of its preacher, was an active participant in the work of the Emergency Unemployment Relief

Committee. But that participation, of course, went beyond what Fosdick alone was doing. Every parishioner and visitor who sat in a pew seat on an Unemployment Sunday was thereby engaged, at least nominally, in a homiletic worship event that raised consciousness—and funds—for relief. Nor would Fosdick’s role as a territorial commander in the block canvassing efforts been strictly separated from his pastoral role in the congregation; he wanted his parishioners to support the canvass, and they wanted to support the efforts of their minister. This support was institutionally enabled, too, by the distribution of brown envelopes marked for extra-budgetary giving (not counted toward the fulfillment of parishioners’ annual pledge amounts) to the work of the relief campaign. A November 1931 editorial in The Church Monthly commended the use of the envelopes, for “a ‘brown envelope’ is a reminder of our attempt to get the people of the congregation to contribute odd sums, as may be possible, to the Emergency Unemployment Relief.” The editorial described the envelopes as “receiving the crumbs,” thereby acknowledging that that particular effort, at least, implied no call for radical changes. In a turn simultaneously unsettling and ingenious, the editorial refrained from explicitly asking for more money, instead describing an envelope that had arrived the day of its writing, containing $5.90. It had come from a nearby orphanage housing fifty children, who had been given an envelope “as a suggestion that they had something to be thankful for and they were better off than some others.” The children contributed odds and ends from their monthly allotments of fifty or seventy-five cents of spending money, leaving the editorial writers to “confess to an attitude of reverence toward [the envelope]
as it rests here upon our desk.” The children themselves thus became, by means of example, the source of moral suasion to encourage readers to donate generously.\textsuperscript{34} 

Yet, The Riverside Church did more than serve as one of many participants in the Emergency Unemployment Relief Committee’s citywide efforts. It also engaged in two responses to the crisis which allowed it to utilize in-house some of the monies that parishioners donated and to engage in some measure of hands-on work. The Riverside Sewing Room began in early 1931, and made use of the building itself as a facility for employing women in an endeavor to prop up family incomes. Also starting in 1931 was the Emergency Employment Service, which involved Riverside in a public-private partnership with the New York State Employment Service and the Charity Organization Society. The specific arrangement, which was “regarded as an emergency measure necessitated by the depression,” ended as of January 1, 1938, when the state agency underwent an internal reorganization and could not continue to offer space to the Charity Organization Society’s Employment Service. Nonetheless, the church continued to operate its employment service in conjunction with district employment offices, and through the decade, the church’s partnership with the public and private agencies resulted in several thousand job placements. As far as Riverside’s own discourse was concerned, this was a thoroughly successful, if also woefully incomplete, enactment of a social gospel rooted in the personalist conviction of the individual’s sacrality.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{34} “Brown Envelopes,” \textit{Church Monthly}, November 1931, 282. 
\textsuperscript{35} Benevolence Committee Minutes, November 5, 1937 and December 3, 1937, Riverside Church Archive, Record Group 9.21, Committee on Benevolences Minutes and Budgets, 1936-1947, Binder.
The Sewing Room

The year 1931 dawned with a new category of listing showing up in the announcements page of the Riverside Church Sunday bulletin (referred to congregationally as the Church Calendar): requests that parishioners be on the lookout for, or themselves provide, job openings. The listings conveyed a sense of urgency, and included new text each week so as to avoid the appearance of rote exercise. The year’s first two, for example, read as follows:

**The church and unemployment.** Here and now, today, our representatives are wrestling with the problem of finding work for more than fifty men and women whom the Charity Organization Society, Riverside District, is depending upon us to help. This number is growing daily and will continue to grow. Can you help? Permanent or temporary work in home, shop, store, factory or anywhere, is wanted.

**This church and unemployment.** Five jobs—four for cleaning women and one for a man bookkeeper—were telephoned to our employment representatives on January second and third by members of the church and were immediately filled. This is a good beginning. Jobs are now needed for men with experience as chauffeurs and drivers, porters, door and elevator men, stationary and safety engineers, bookkeepers and clerical work, plasterers, painters, foremen, soda dispensers and pharmacists, cooks and valets. The majority of the women, registered so far, need work by the day—viz., housework and sewing. The other women are qualified for factory work and clerical positions.

The year’s third week saw, after another original paragraph seeking information about any and all job postings, the addition of further programmatic exposition, conveying that

The above paragraph covers briefly what we might term our extension work in connection with unemployment. In addition to that we have some thirty to forty otherwise unemployed women who have dependents to care for, working four days a week in our sewing room. This is a bit of temporary relief work being done on the premises during these winter months. Mrs. Katherine W. Eddy, who is acting as chairman of this relief work, requests that members of the church and congregation who have
sewing that could be done here by these women or who want a seamstress to go into their homes, apply to her for co-operation in this matter. In paying the regular rate for such sewing as you need to have done you will be helping directly in the Benevolence Budget of the church and making a definite contribution toward relief of the unemployed.

Regarding this latter project, Fosdick had engaged in behind-the-scenes fundraising. One letter, to Mary Harkness—married to Edward Harkness—professed reluctance to trade on a personal and pastoral relationship for financial ends, but noted that the “opportunity for service” was too great to neglect the effort. Fosdick explained that the equipment and staffing in place to make the Sewing Room operational, if only the money could be secured to pay the women whom it would employ. Drawing a distinction between church-based relief and charitable aid, Fosdick noted that the women involved “would be selected by the Charity Organization Society from those otherwise dependent on charity.” The church also had the opportunity to participate in social transformation, for in addition to any custom work for parishioners which would be commissioned, the women would be set to work on “a large quantity of partly finished garments which the charity organization has on hand, and which were originally requisitioned from tenement houses where ‘sweat shop’ work was being done under conditions that were condemned by the authorities.” Fosdick had half of the initial $15,000 cost on hand, and hoped that Mrs. Harkness could help him close the gap, enabling Riverside to “take [the women] off the hands of the public charities to complete garments for needy people.”

36 Riverside Church worship bulletins, January 4, 1931, January 11, 1931, and January 18, 1931, Riverside Church Archives, Record Group 13.2, Box 219, Sunday Calendars and Special Services. 37 Harry Emerson Fosdick to Mrs. Edward S. Harkness, December 30, 1931, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archives at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4A Box 2 Folder 1. It is unclear to me whether the letter was misdated or whether Fosdick was approaching this particular patron to fund the project’s second year.
In a *Church Monthly* article several months later, Eugene Carder wrote that the recently ended church year had “given a demonstration on a rather large scale of what it may mean when a church takes its community responsibilities seriously.” He observed that the church faced the emergency of “unemployment on a large scale . . . in the fall of 1930,” and, though it did not have money set aside in the budget to address it, he characterized the response to direct appeals for extra giving as “most generous,” observing that, “Something in excess of fifteen thousand dollars was raised and spent on this project between November and May.” By “this project” he meant both the Emergency Employment Service and the Sewing Room, conjoined as two parts of a single response, with “one [undertaking] growing very naturally out of our immediate contacts in the city, and the other being suggested by the very nature of the building and equipment at our disposal.”

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Carder describes the first round of the Sewing Room’s work as having run for four and a half months. The project was birthed out of a realization that the church had viable sewing equipment and ample space in its tower that could be readily deployed to bring some measure of relief in the midst of the Depression. In its initial period, the endeavor operated four days per week, paying the women who worked there three dollars per day, along with providing a hot lunch—which would, by the 1933 cycle, be reduced to the provision of coffee and tea as a means of extending the program budget. Carder indicates a reliance on outside expertise to help filter candidates and assuage any concerns for safety that parishioners might have, noting that, “Only such women as the Charity Organization Society vouched for or as were known personally to the members

of the Church Staff were eligible for consideration.” Yet, in contrast to, or in conjunction
with, that worthy poor trope, he is eager to likewise demonstrate the warmth of the
program. “Members of the Church Staff laid out the plan,” he writes, “but it was
supervised and humanized by the constant presence and kindly oversight of volunteers
from among the women of the church.” In the face of the coldness of mass society and its
unemployment crisis, Carder offers personalist concern for optimizing the conditions in
which the program’s clients might flourish. The language offers an ambiguity: on the one
hand, the endeavor required a pre-screening process and necessitated supervision and
oversight. It engendered for the Riverside congregation, in other words, some sense of
class- and possibly race-based unease regarding the denizens of the surrounding
communities that needed to be addressed and reassured; the program was being carried
out in a controlled atmosphere. On the other hand, drawing on Victorian mores of
gendered nurture even in a new social and industrial context which blurred the spheres of
what was domestic and public, the overseeing supervisors were kindly women,
humanizing the project, allowing the church to engage a compassionate response to the
needs of the individuals, and by extension their families, who were participating in the
Sewing Room.39

Social gospel themes of cooperation, harmony, and interdependence ring through
Carder’s characterization of the Sewing Room undertaking. The project attended to the
physical needs of the women it employed, helping them to support their families and in
some cases find further work; of the fifty-eight women who labored in the Sewing Room

39 Ibid., 168. On gender, benevolence work, the conflation of “femininity” and “morality,” and the class
implications of women’s benevolence work, see Lori D. Ginzberg, Women and the Work of
Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States (New Haven: Yale
over its first program cycle, Carder notes that sixteen were subsequently placed in permanent positions and two secured old age pensions. Further, all of the women received medical and dental care while employed in the program. Their labor turned them from supplicants into producers, contributing to a larger endeavor of global outreach; they produced costumes for theatrical productions by the Riverside Guild (the church’s young people’s group), created outfits for dolls that were sent to India, and, over the four and a half months Carder details, crafted four thousand garments which were sent to hospitals and other city institutions assisting vulnerable populations. Further indications of the Sewing Room’s larger institutional embeddedness are included in a 1933 report sent to Fosdick, which noted that, “Most of the work we did was on Red Cross garments which were being made from government cotton and over eleven thousand garments. . . . The three other institutions for which we did a little work were Stoneywold Sanitarium, Teacher’s College and the orphanage run by Mrs. Vestor in Jerusalem.” In the Church Monthly, Carder’s claims are bold: “The women were kept busy at useful work under pleasant conditions. . . . They spent each day in a bright, cheerful room high above the city’s traffic and confusion. We began by giving them work. In the end it developed that to some of them we actually gave life itself.”

It should be noted that Riverside was not alone among those engaged in relief efforts in their utilization sewing equipment to employ women in need of jobs. In April 1932, the Times reported on ten such projects throughout the city, all funded through the Emergency Unemployment Relief Committee. All told, the ten sewing rooms were

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40 Mary Downs to Harry Emerson Fosdick, August 14, 1933, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archive at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4A Box 2 Folder 1; Carder, “The Flexibility of the Church Budget,” 168.
employing nearly eight hundred women, who were crafting clothes that were distributed
to needy families and individuals, as well as taking in custom work. Yet, if Riverside
was not unique in deploying its space and time for a sewing-based employment project, it
did make recourse—as seen in Carder’s article—to a particular type of language in
justifying and upholding the program, and in seeking its ongoing support. A 1932 Church
Monthly article on the church’s Social Service Department, which had been formally
instituted and designated in the church budget at the start of that year, discussed the
ongoing work of the Sewing Room, which had started another program cycle that
January. In addition to noting statistics—eighty-five women employed in that cycle,
many of them mothers of families, projecting to a total of 297 individuals benefitting
materially, in addition to four people employed in a custodial capacity—the article
highlighted again the importance of the volunteers involved. “This phase of the ‘work
room’ experience . . . cannot be too greatly emphasized. It means that we are finding
leadership among our own people; that we are doing the friendly, intimate, human thing;
that, in other words, we are not just a big machine supported by a budget and manned by
professionals.” The church thus drew on the language of individual worth as a means of
undergirding service activity that was part of its social gospel—a discursive formation
that bespoke the desire to simultaneously effect personal regeneration and reconstructed
social conditions.

article notes the cooperation of churches in furnishing work requests for the rooms before explaining
the need to develop a larger public clientele in order to keep each of the rooms operating at full pitch.
This description of the EURC-funded program was printed a year after Riverside’s own program, but I
was unable to cover any direct links between the two.
Fosdick intimated the church’s conceptualization of its unemployment relief efforts as being embodiments of social gospel personalism in a letter that he sent to Sarah Bulkley, thanking her for her gift of “$500.00 to help in the work the Riverside Church is doing for the unemployed in New York City.” Referring to both the Sewing Room and the Emergency Employment Service, Fosdick characterized an unspecified “we” as “getting an immense amount of satisfaction from the personal service we are being able to render in cooperation with the organized charities of the city.” He then invited Bulkley to “see an interesting sight” by visiting the church to “look at the sewing women, through whose work for which we pay we are keeping some eighty odd people out of the slough of despond.” He also commended to her the “more extended work through the District Committee of the Charity Organization Society, and altogether I am happy that we have been able to work out a technique for service that seems to me so much worthwhile.”

Through their efforts, that is, the congregation at Riverside was enacting and consciously applying their Christian faith in partnership with a wider social network that worked to the social good by optimizing the circumstances of individuals, ministering simultaneously to their material and their psychic needs.

The Emergency Employment Service was a more extensive undertaking than was the Sewing Room. Whereas the Sewing Room ran for only several months out of each year, the Emergency Employment Service involved Riverside in an ongoing public-

43 Sarah Bulkley to Harry Emerson Fosdick, December 23, 1930; Harry Emerson Fosdick to Sarah Bulkley, December 26, 1930, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archive at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 2A Box 2 Folder 2.
private partnership that ran continuously from its inception in January 1931. As such, it was the subject of regular presentation and interpretation to the congregation. In addition to the weekly bulletin announcements soliciting information about open jobs, exposition of the service showed up with some regularity in *The Church Monthly*. In the same article in which he had explained the Sewing Room, Eugene Carder articulated the Emergency Employment Service as having its origins in the revelation that the State Labor Bureau’s employment office in the city “was literally swamped by the number of applicants. . . . Our church saw in that situation an opportunity to move out of its own cloistered seclusion and lend a hand where hands were most needed.” Granting that Carder’s language of cloistering was deployed for dramatic effect, it is nonetheless significant that Riverside’s response to this information was to enter into a partnership that had it acting alongside the state agency and the Charity Organization Society. For the first six months of 1931, the church spent $5000 to cover salaries and office expenses for two additional trained workers from the COS, one of whom worked downtown in office space provided by the state agency. At Fosdick’s urging, the Trustees pledged to underwrite the program for the following year, as well. Again, making allowances for rhetorical flourish, the language with which Carder articulated the program’s design is striking. While one COS worker was based in the downtown office, the other was dedicated to the field, seeking out all job possibilities in the Riverside district. “This second young woman made it her business,” wrote Carder, “to evangelize the shop-keepers, apartment house owners, housewives, everybody, with the gospel of responsibility for finding, reporting, or creating work, work of any kind for anybody anywhere.” And along with this religious duty of employment evangelism, he placed particular emphasis on “the fact that
permanent jobs mean not only continuing wages but rehabilitation of personal and family morale.”

That September, an editorial in the *Monthly* commended to readers an article in that same issue by Clare M. Tousley, the Assistant Director of the Charity Organization Society. The editorial writer pressed for a sense of immediacy, contending that philosophizing about the Depression’s causes could come later; in the short term, the church was “pinning our faith to ‘getting jobs for the jobless.’” In terms resonating with spiritual content, hearkening to Jesus’ reminder that “you always have the poor with you” and his injunction, “He who has ears, let him hear,” the author reminded readers “that you have the jobless with you right now and that if you look about you with seeing eyes and understanding heart you will discover the jobs too.”

For her part, Tousley voiced both the convictions underlying the program and acknowledged it as only a partial contribution to the overall relief effort, contending that “the cure of joblessness is jobs, even if this particular part of the curing has to be done on a limited scale.” In articulating the service’s aim—namely, that “the job must fit the worker, insuring as permanent a tenure as possible”—Tousley likewise utilizes language congruent with the personalist ethic imbuing Fosdick’s homiletic corpus, in which the preacher made frequent recourse to the importance of families as centers of spiritual nurture and thereby integral to the health of the social body as a whole. Touting the Emergency Employment Services efforts as devising an intensive and individualized plan for each client, Tousley cites “the common knowledge that unemployment may harm its victims far beyond the ravages of hunger. There are often more devastating effects on the

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44 Carder, “The Flexibility of the Church Budget,” 166.
jobless man, the undermining of faith in himself, the disorganization of the home, the slow disintegration of the family bonds under pressure of these psychological disturbances.”

Tousley describes a registration process for the employment service that was similar to that of the Sewing Room, insofar as only “applicants sent by the . . . Charity Organization Society and by the staff of the Riverside Church are interviewed and registered, and the visitors and staff members are asked to send only those who are unquestionably employable.” These standards of professionalization gave Riverside’s program an advantage over the state office’s, which did not have the same sort of screening process. While acknowledging that little more than a third of applicants to date had been placed in jobs, Tousley argues that all benefitted from the process of intensive interviewing, which she contrasts to “being herded into crowded offices.” Offering, like a skilled preacher, anecdotes to enliven her statistical picture, Tousley describes the case of “Mary J.,” a woman who’d run out of leads and turned to the COS only to get some more. Mary J.’s case demonstrated, without saying so explicitly, that Riverside’s efforts were assisting the worthy poor, for Mary J., who had an ill daughter and three grandchildren dependent upon her, “wanted work. She certainly did not intend to sit back and be supported.” Tousley pointedly ends the report in Mary J.’s voice: Mary knew “well what all of this means; she knows employment agencies in a depression. ‘You were right that day,’ she voluntarily acknowledged to the COS visitor, ‘this agency is different.’” And if that weren’t accolade enough, Tousley wrote another article the following January which quoted a letter from Frances Perkins, the New York State Labor

Commissioner, who asked to have expressed to Fosdick and the church her “deep appreciation of this three-cornered welfare project which they are making possible. From my point of view it is a really significant experiment, and far as I know a unique one.”

The Emergency Employment Service’s ability to offer the balm of personal attention in the face of the Depression’s depersonalization—and thus its contribution to social healing—was a recurring theme in Tousley’s occasional updates in the Monthly. In the same article in which she quotes the letter from Perkins, Tousley ties together social, personal, and familial health, asserting that the service “is based on the knowledge of all interested in social progress that there are disturbing psychological consequences of unemployment to family life.” Again making recourse to personal narrative, she writes that behind each placement “is a Tolstoyan drama of human relationships,” one of which involved a wife in a state of nervous tension, fearing for her children and convinced that her husband, who was out of work and had become short-tempered, was not trying seriously to find a job. During a three month job search, the COS worker tried to intervene in the tense home situation, with little success. However, once the Employment Service had found a job placement for the husband, “there was almost no contact needed between the COS worker and the family. They were—fixed!” In a 1934 article, she couches the worth of the service in terms of its ability to restore confidence to people whose long-term unemployment was breaking them down in spirit and reverberating beyond the self, potentially even rendering them permanently unfit for work and therefore a drain on charitable resources. “The registered applicant represents in almost every instance a family situation in which much more than money is needed—much more

than the uniform allowances of food and shelter to which the public agencies are necessarily limited.” In other words, the church was helping to provide what the state was unable to. “The requirement here is for more than a little human understanding, and for a type of assistance that will do considerably more than keep body and soul together—that will restore hope and confidence to self-respecting people who have asked only the opportunity to earn their own way.” And the program’s aim went beyond succor for the re-personalized employee; it sought to humanize employers, as well. Tousley describes “the major objective of the Employment Service” as “service to employer and employee alike, bringing together the right person and the right job.”

Neither the appeal to personal anecdotes as a method of garnering support, nor the understanding of unemployment as erosive of personal and familial morale in addition to being an economic issue, were unique to Riverside’s discourse. Both of these were in wider public circulation. Harry Hopkins, director of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, created in the New Deal to coordinate and increase direct federal unemployment assistance to the states, employed Lorena Hickok to travel the country, speaking with people about the human scale of the Depression. He dealt in statistics, but wanted stories. His rationale was that pure mental exercises to gauge the extent of unemployment run up against “the natural limit of personal imagination and sympathy. You can pity six men, but you can’t keep stirred up over six million.” He wanted human details to elicit supportive responses. And those human details included battered psyches and family tumult, particularly related to gender roles and family functioning, as sociologist Mirra Komarovsky discovered. As one of her interview subjects told her, “It’s

only natural. When a father cannot support his family, supply them with clothing and
good food, the children are bound to lose respect. . . . When they see me hanging around
the house all the time and know that I can’t find work, it has its effect all right.” And
another jobless father explained, “Before the depression, I wore the pants in this family,
and rightly so. During the depression, I lost something. Maybe you call it self-respect, but
in losing it I also lost the respect of my children, and I am afraid that I am losing my
wife.”

That Riverside was not unique in these respects, however, does not make their
approach to the Depression and to their means of unemployment relief any less
significant. Rather, it highlights an overlap between the discourse of the social gospel
personalism articulated by Fosdick and a wider cultural discourse of which Fosdick’s
cultural production was a part. This overlap allowed Riverside and its constituency to
bring into their relief efforts particular religious understandings and motivations that
nonetheless allowed for a sense of genuine partnership in a wider, shared endeavor to
effect social healing and stability. Tousley’s articles, deploying as they did narrative
accounts of how the church’s programs were helping actual people, paralleled the writing
that Harry Hopkins commissioned from Lorena Hickok. They ignited the sympathetic
imagination of the *Monthly’s* readership, encouraging their support of a church ministry
that had the immediate aim of psychic and material relief to a broad constituency.
Further, through making possible the improvement in the circumstances of the service’s
clients, parishioners could contribute to a general strengthening of the social fabric. The

49 Hopkins quoted in Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 167; Mirra Komarovsky, *The Unemployed Man and
Emergency Employment Service, which overlapped neatly some of the work carried out by the Emergency Unemployment Relief Committee, could simultaneously address the human face of the Depression, seeking to carry out the culturally recognized work of restoring morale and increasing family stability, while internally fueling its efforts at Riverside with the knowledge that it was enacting the religious philosophy regularly articulated by Fosdick. As Fosdick himself emphasized at a Church Cabinet meeting at which the congregation’s Depression relief efforts were the central focus, “I hope all the organizations will remember the philosophy we are working on—nothing matters but people—the only value we have is what we are doing for individual people.”

Further, as noted, the partnership in which Riverside’s initiative in the Emergency Employment Service involved it was with both a private, charitable organization and with an arm of the state. This was a mutually beneficial arrangement. On the one hand, it increased the efficacy of the church’s efforts, broadening the scope of potential employers and employees it could reach via the utilization of trained, dedicated workers. It also, according to Tousley, enhanced the agential authority accruing to applicants as they attended job interviews: “To be allowed to function within the walls of the State Employment Service is enormously valuable, as it puts the work in its logical setting and sends the applicants out to prospective employers under the proper auspices.”

The partnership further embedded Riverside in the public eye via media coverage, as the New York Times relayed its employment activities—for example, reporting on the commencement of the jobs service, reproducing one of the Sunday morning appeals for job information from the church bulletin, and summarizing an annual budget sermon in

50 “Meeting of the Church Cabinet: Work of the Year Reviewed,” Church Monthly, July 1933, 183.
which Fosdick characterized the church’s employment project as being “much better than charity” and reported that, over three years, it had matched people with jobs paying an aggregate of $250,000. In a passage that must have pleased any parishioner reading the article, the *Times* quoted Fosdick as exhorting, “If you are going to expect me to preach in this glorious Gothic church during another year, with human misery all around us, you must make possible the continuance and extension of practical Christian service like that. A man can preach Christ and what He stands for if the church he is preaching in is doing that sort of work.” And in a moment of media reflexivity, Tousley named that article as one “way in which the good word goes out from The Riverside Church,” claiming that an “immediate result” of the report was “a telephone call from the woman owner of a cafeteria, who wanted a counter girl at once.” Preaching and program converged, with the church’s efforts to engage a faith that was actively social in its attention to individual need bolstered in Sunday worship and amplified through print media.⁵¹

In addition to involving the church in a multifaceted network of relief, the Emergency Employment Service also enabled the church to conceive of itself as offering a public witness to its personalist social gospel. The success rate in finding placements, however partial, was also fairly remarkable considering the extent of the crisis. May Preuss, one of the COS workers for whom Riverside paid salary costs, reported in *The Church Monthly* that, over the course of 1933, the program had registered 1,346 new applicants and filled 1,606 jobs, with total wage earnings reaching $125,000. She highlighted the continued development of relations with the New York State

Employment Service, which allowed for a closer integration of services. Beyond that, however, she noted that December 1933 saw ninety-two placements made through the Civil Works Administration—which meant that, in addition to partnering with the State of New York, Riverside’s program had become a player in the enactment of the New Deal. Thus, while the Emergency Employment Service fulfilled its personalist underpinnings by attending to the needs of individuals and their families—as Clare Tousley expressed it, “Many members and friends of The Riverside Church, by reporting opportunities of many kinds, have greatly facilitated this work of family rehabilitation which has been undertaken by the employment service”—the individual attention furnished on the service’s prescreened clients equally functioned as a witness by its contrast to what the state was able to provide. In a telling statement to Fosdick, Riverside Social Service Department head Mary Downs asserted that, “We feel that our service is not only to the unemployed but that we are giving an adequate service to the employers without any cost to either, and that as a demonstration, we have set a standard of what an adequate State or Federal employment service ought to be.” In other words, the Emergency Employment Service enabled Riverside to pursue the core goal of the social gospel: the Christianization of society through actions designed to transform social institutions into nurturers of human flourishing.\(^52\)

Riverside’s Response: A Critical Assessment

Once again, the numbers, particularly those of the clients seen and placed by the Emergency Employment Service, are impressive, bespeaking not only the advantage that Riverside’s program had in terms of choosing who would be availed of its services, but also the tenacity with which church members sought and offered open positions and the persistence of the COS workers laboring in partnership with the church. The Downs memorandum referenced above bears testimony to this, enumerating the total number of registrants entered into the program over its first four years. From 1931 through 1934, the service 6,908 applicants, finding work of some kind for 2,473 of them. A further memorandum that Downs sent to Fosdick in 1939 indicates that, from its inception in January 1931 through September 1938, the efforts of the Riverside Church 1,353 employers for the program. The which is truly striking about Downs’s 1935 memorandum, however, is her acknowledgement of some of Riverside’s own members as those who had received employment help through the service. She lists names of several such members, appealing to their dignity in noting that “any one of [them], including their families, would have suffered keenly to have been the recipients of public relief.” She thus contends that enthusiasm for the program runs high, not only among ministers, staff, volunteers, and its congregational supporters, but also among “our members who have been helped by it. For it has been the one concrete evidence to the latter, that the church

53 Mary Downs to Harry Emerson Fosdick, Memorandum, October 27, 1939, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archive at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4A Box 2 Folder 2. It is unclear whether Downs means this figure to represent the total number of employers with whom the service had placed applicants over the eight year period, or if this was the number who could be specifically tied to the church either as parishioners or connections of parishioners.
was doing everything in its power to help them and that no matter how desperate their need, here was a security on which they could depend.”

In and of itself, this is not surprising. Any urban church of Riverside’s size that ran an employment program of similar scale would undoubtedly have found its own members among the clientele. What makes Downs’s report to Fosdick striking is that it is only here—in a private report—that the program’s service to some of Riverside’s own members is explicitly noted. It might reasonably have been assumed from Tousley’s reports that referrals made by the church staff or otherwise coming from Riverside Church included church members among their number, but any such assumptions were left implicit. The regular Sunday bulletin announcements and the various articles in The Church Monthly focused instead on the role of parishioners in serving as volunteers, in finding and notifying the church of job opportunities, or in providing those opportunities. On one hand, this was solid strategy; it rhetorically encouraged participation in and cooperation with the church’s efforts, grounding them in particular religious convictions. On the other hand, the focus on agency—particularly the agency of those with time to give or with enough money to hire people—suggested that the enactment of the church’s personalist social gospel was the domain of givers; those who were on the receiving end, lucky as they were to be avoiding the disgrace of charity, were implicitly this social gospel’s objects rather than its subjects. Here, that is, the dual impulses of paternalism and commitment to community noted by Weisenfeld are in strong relief: the church maintained the sense of noblesse oblige which helped to fuel its activity by concealing, at least in part, the extent to which it was helping its own.
Indeed, if a *Monthly* article by Grace Patton is indicative of the general Riverside Church view of those it assisted, parishioner-clients may have been just as happy to remain unremarked upon. Patton describes spending a day at the employment office, where any eligible person arriving at the church in search of a job would have been referred after passing through an interview with Mary Downs, observing the two COS workers as they did their jobs. Patton’s stated purpose was to “get behind” the regular job solicitation announcements in the church bulletin. Among the people she took note of amid the constant activity in the office were a “tall, gaunt, young giant of a Negro” with a “beautiful display of teeth,” who was “at once greeted as an old friend;” a “little old Irish woman who . . . was a real ‘individual’ who would lend color to any scene;” an Italian gentleman; and “an industrious little old German chaircaner.” Patton’s observations led her to reflect on the contrast between the grandeur of the Riverside Church, on its side of Riverside Drive, and the denizens “far down on the other side, clustered close to the rubbish-strewn bank of the Hudson River,” where there stood “a pathetic patch of haphazard huts, thrown together in the hour of adversity by homeless, work-denied men.” She offered of her congregation that “such a richly favored church as Riverside, which, though it had its inception in the days of prosperity, came to birth at the unfortunate time of adversity, would come in for a large share of any critical challenge hurled at the churches.” But she believed that the Emergency Employment Service “was part (and only part) of Riverside’s answer. It has accepted the challenge, and is at close grips with that grim monster, Unemployment.”54 The reflections displayed the liberalism of a congregation that sought to help people across boundaries of race and class. At the same

time, they settled a decisively paternalistic gaze upon the recipients of its aid, neatly (and artificially) separating the helpers from the helped.

One final comment to offer in terms of Riverside’s response to the unemployment crisis, while not novel, is nonetheless worth offering: namely, that the program was one of amelioration rather than of reform. Jobless clients who sought, and perhaps found, work through the employment service were fitted once again into the system of supply and demand. And from the side of those positioned to offer time or employment, Tousley’s 1935 update is telling. After describing a good fit that was found between an employer and an employee, she avers that “this is no unusual case, for many employers have found similarly satisfactory workers. In fact, some employers are so certain of the ability of the Employment Service to fill their needs that they make rather unusual requests.” These were, of course, requests born of privilege. Tousley’s example is of an employer who had used the service for three years running, calling in “from the country in the early fall and [asking] that her city house be staffed with suitable servants when she arrived home from the country. Another called for someone who was qualified to do some shopping for her.” These were not the only sorts of jobs with which the Emergency Employment Service connected its clients, of course. But this type of employment, and request for employment, shows up frequently enough in the record that it becomes clear: much of Riverside’s response to the unemployment crisis of the Depression functioned in such a manner as to salve the conscience of the privileged. It was, in essence, a social gospel variant of offering charity without calling it charity. It

met the needs of some without fundamentally changing the system under which so many suffered.

Yet, as an example of how a personalist social gospel could provide a framework for meaningful religious action within a context of a burgeoning mass society and a dehumanizing and bewildering economic crisis, Riverside’s concrete response was quite powerful. It embodied, in a number of ways, Fosdick’s five-point outline of religious responses to contemporary conditions with which this chapter began. That outline was bookended with preaching—better preaching in general, and a more courageous proclamation of the social gospel as a particular example of what better preaching entailed. Fosdick consistently preached his personalist social gospel, highlighting the power, promise, and value of the individual personality while encouraging active participation in unemployment relief and critiquing the abuses of the industrial system and the global factors which had eventuated in the Depression, appealing to the professional expertise represented within his congregation to craft systemic solutions. He did not offer these specific solutions himself, but his own outside activism formed a model by which congregational response could be encouraged and inspired. He thus helped to set the conditions for, and the parishioners and congregational groups involved in outreach efforts enacted, a response of “practical social service,” rooted in a framework of attending to “interior, individual problems” within the course of addressing material needs—in the process forming a counterwitness to the state bureaucracy’s lack of human scope. If this was only a partial realization of the overarching social gospel aim of instantiating the kingdom of God within social conditions, it nonetheless furnished a means of religious response to the crisis for Riverside’s largely middle class
constituencies. It allowed them to find and retain a sense of personal meaning and efficacy in the face of a far-reaching crisis that otherwise offered nothing but a series of depersonalizing dislocations.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

The central business of every human being is to be a real person. ¹

As the 1930s faded, the Great Depression became a bad, if raw, memory and the United States watched as war unfolded around the globe. In the runup to World War II, Fosdick had preached against Hitler and Nazism while also steadfastly maintaining his commitment to Christian pacifism. With the December 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, the nation’s military commitments changed, but Fosdick’s theological, philosophical, and pastoral commitments did not. Fosdick’s sermon at Riverside on December 14, 1941, “The Church of Christ in a Warring World,” wrestled with the question of how the church ought to respond to the conditions of the world in which it found itself. “Our nation is at war,” Fosdick observed, “not as a matter of choice but of fact, and this situation confronts us, saying, You, the churches of Christ, hating war, as you ought to, finding in it, as you should, the denial of everything Christ stands for, what positively are you going to do for your generation now?” ²

The question and its response, both in the homiletic moment and in its outworking over the next weeks and months, is illustrative of several themes with which this project has dealt. Fosdick utilized his role as preacher to articulate an antiwar stance characteristic of his generation’s social gospel—a social gospel which had been chastened by its failure to bring about utter global renewal after the first world war, but which was nonetheless determined that there was an authentic religious responsibility to

address the conditions of the social world. The church, that is, was meant not to withdraw into a shell of isolated purity, but to engage the problems of the world around it. Fosdick proclaimed that, “we will keep a differential and distinctive quality; if grace be given us, the living ferment of the Master’s spirit . . . that yet may leaven this evil world to decency, brotherhood and peace, shall be kept vital and potent in our lives and churches.” Yet, at the same time, “we will not separate ourselves from our people. Their troubles are our troubles; their sins, alas, have been our sins too; their peril is ours.”

He resounded a familiar refrain, contending that “the totalitarian states . . . do not like” the Christian church because it “stands for something they do not stand for—the sacredness of human personality,” and he characterized the “days ahead” as “an endurance test” that would require renewed “interior resources of stability.” But he also argued forcefully for the churches to carry out their function of “service—practical service to people in need.”

He implored the rejection of hatred, racial prejudice, self-righteous nationalism, and hubris. Nor was the sermon meant for the Riverside congregation alone; the following Sunday, Fosdick broadcast it to his variegated audience across the country on his National Vespers program, marshaling his argument for a robust Christian social engagement to a populace reeling with the shock of having been attacked.

Riverside’s own response to Fosdick’s call to engage a world at war by ministering to the spiritual needs of individuals and the physical needs of all those crushed by war involved the utilization of the building and the mobilization of the congregation. Miller notes in particular a Red Cross blood plasma unit that was set up in the church, surgical dressings made by congregants, fundraising on behalf of various

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3 Ibid., 4.
4 Ibid., 6-7.
agencies, and the church purchase of government war bonds. Fosdick was awarded a Certificate of Merit that recognized his contribution to national morale through his radio broadcasts. The congregation made its space available to the naval officer candidates of the Midshipmen’s School headquartered at Columbia University, who used it for band and choir practice, recreational purposes, and, for many, Sunday morning worship and Sunday evening attendance of the Protestant Vesper Service. Church members serving in the military received at least one annual letter from Fosdick and Riverside’s other ministers, along with copies of The Church Monthly, a one-volume edition of Fosdick’s early devotional works, The Three Meanings, and a volume entitled Words of Jesus for which Fosdick had written an introduction. Additionally, visiting military members were invited to sign a “War-Time Visitors Book,” giving their names, home addresses, and names of loved ones. The church then sent letters to those family members, informing them that their loved ones had attended services at Riverside and offering words of support and encouragement.  

There is a certain continuity in evidence between Fosdick’s and Riverside’s activities in response to the war and those in response to the Great Depression with its crisis of unemployment. In both instances, pastor and parishioners sought to address the immediate psychic and material pain which large, systemic forces had visited upon legions of individuals and families. Fosdick and his congregation utilized social gospel preaching, the mechanisms of mass media, an expansive physical plant with its attendant

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5 There were three versions of these letters—for soldiers, for “girls in Service,” and for midshipmen. The program started in December, 1941, but the church kept no record of how many letters had been sent during the first eight months. However, from August 30, 1942 through May 21, 1946, the church sent 14,700 of the letters. Dorothy Noyes to Norris L. Tibbetts, Interoffice Memorandum, Harry Emerson Fosdick Collection, The Burke Library Archive at Union Theological Seminary, Subseries 4A Box 2 Folder 3. On Fosdick and Riverside’s activities during World War II and beyond, see Miller, Harry Emerson Fosdick, 533-547.
resources, and deep pools of volunteer energy harnessed through an extensive network of church organizations in order to mobilize on behalf of the suffering. As the *Church Monthly* editorialist had argued in the thick of the unemployment crisis, urgent need called for “postponing for some more leisurely hour in years to come the temptation to ‘take it out’ in philosophizing.” When faced with problems on the scale of economic depression and global warfare, the preacher and his congregation prioritized direct action arising from an internal sense of responsibility to address and alleviate suffering in the world, particularly as carried physically and psychically by individuals.

There is a further continuity that is perhaps less obvious. Fosdick was clearly adept at articulating and enacting the social gospel in an explicit and forthright manner, engaging situations of social injustice very directly. But sometimes his approach was exceedingly indirect—a consequence of Fosdick’s philosophical grounding in personalism. Even while he was engaged in social activism in a variety of forms, Fosdick could simultaneously produce a style of writing and of preaching which obscured activism itself in favor of developing the interior resources that he saw as activism’s precursors. The internal task was a necessary prerequisite to successful and effective conceptualization and enactment of the external task, but in focusing on personality development as the means of social improvement, the social gospel could disappear behind individual concerns in Fosdick’s preaching and its mediated embodiments. This was true when he published *As I See Religion* in 1932, compiling a series of previously published essays that characterized the development of human personality as the primary aim and task of healthy religion. The essays had mostly been written prior to the onset of

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the Great Depression, and though the book form was not produced until the economic travail was well underway, Fosdick did not add any commentary that reflected contemporary conditions. A decade later, Fosdick repeated that move with an even stronger focus on the interior life of the individual.

In mid-1943, with the United States well into its second year of direct involvement in World War II, Harper and Brothers released another Fosdick volume. This one, as was Fosdick’s standard practice, had gone through a trial run of its materials in a Wednesday night lecture series at Riverside. *On Being a Real Person* quickly garnered bestseller status, finishing out the year in fourth place on the nonfiction sales list with more than 200,000 copies sold. Alice Payne Hackett notes that, out of that year’s group of most purchased volumes, only “two titles on the nonfiction list were not ‘war books.’” On *Being a Real Person* was one of those two. Though produced in the thick of global conflagration by a social gospel minister who had for two decades adopted a strong, Christian pacifist position, who preached against Hitler and fascism, and who contended that jingoistic nationalism was one of the most corrosive forces threatening American democracy, the book offered three references to war—none of them specific to the one which served as its backdrop—along with three mentions of Hitler and one of Mussolini. Nor was the prior decade of economic malaise in evidence; references to depression are abundant, but only of the internal sort. Rather, Fosdick offered a volume to an audience that he “pictured . . . in terms of the many, diverse individuals who have come to me for help.” He tried to depict and interpret what he had seen “going on inside real people,” attempting “to describe their familiar mental and emotional maladies, their

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alibis and rationalizations, their ingenious, unconscious tricks of evasion and escape, their handling of fear, anxiety, guilt, and humiliation, their compensations and sublimations also, and the positive faiths and resources from which I have seen help come.”8 In a context of war, Fosdick offered psychology.

It is not that Fosdick had suddenly decided that social conditions were utterly unimportant. Rather, they were transitory, while the task of becoming a “real person” was timeless. By “real person,” Fosdick intended an individual who had developed a psychologically integrated personality that could withstand various disintegrative forces (primarily internal, such as anxiety, fear, guilt, or depression), and which drew on internal reserves of spiritual power in order to withstand, respond to, and even shape the surrounding world. Social conditions were not negligible, but were relativized; they shifted, while the task of developing personality stayed constant. Fosdick’s delineation of the psychological task as basic and social conditions as impermanent is worth quoting at length:

That human happiness is at stake in the success or failure of this undertaking seems clear. No external good fortune can bring abiding enjoyment to a half-made, unorganized personality. Without exaggeration it can be said that frustrated, disintegrated, inhibited, unhappy people, who cannot match themselves with life and become efficient personalities, constitute the greatest single tragedy in the world. Wars come and go; economic circumstances alter with time and place; natural handicaps and catastrophes, inherent in human existence, fall with varying incidence on everyone; social inequities are cruel to some, and inherited prosperity ruins others; but through every situation in this variegated scene, in mansion and hovel, war and peace, wealth and penury, domestic felicity and discord, among the uneducated and in university faculties, an omnipresent calamity is found, strangely impartial in its choice of a matrix. Under every kind of circumstance people entrusted with

8 Fosdick, Real Person, ix.
personality, unable to escape it but incapable of managing it, are making a mess of it, and are thereby plunging into an earthly hell.⁹

Fosdick here appeals to a fundamental essence of human existence, personality, and finds it imbricated with the varied social and material conditions in which people are to be found; the social and the personal are inextricably bound together. At the same time, personality, or its raw material, is a universal that runs through the malleable social. As such, attending to its successful development is a key element leading to social transformation.

Again, this was not a turning away from the social gospel, but rather a permutation thereof. As Stephanie Myers-Shirk has persuasively argued in her history of pastoral counseling, “the clergy who attempted to unite their theology with the knowledge of the rapidly growing social sciences represented a continuation” of social gospel aims; whereas “their predecessors sought to affect society by changing social institutions, these clergy sought to change society through work with individuals.”¹⁰ In Fosdick’s case, of course, it was not an either/or proposition. He engaged in direct advocacy and in varied forms of exhortation aimed at redressing social wrongs and bringing about social change, but he also placed a priority on the cultivation of internal resources as a step toward creating individuals with the moral and spiritual resources to facilitate a transformed society. Fosdick fits firmly within what Matthew Hedstrom denotes as “a rich tradition, dating back to Emerson, of American spirituality—

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⁹ Ibid., 3.
individual, mystical, and contemplative as it may be—functioning simultaneously as a resource for progressive social and political engagement.\textsuperscript{11}

The incidental references to social conditions in \textit{On Being a Real Person} clearly indicate that Fosdick conceptualized of his task this way. As Hedstrom notes, the flyer for the lecture series which became the book, “Being a Real Person,” held in late 1939, contended that the start of war in Europe meant that “the World-Crisis confronts us with two problems: handling public policy and handling ourselves. With the second of these this series of lectures and questionnaires is concerned.”\textsuperscript{12} There is a limiting of scope, but also a suggestion that the two problems are intimately related. In the book itself, Fosdick argues that, “Instability in man’s social, economic, and international life [ought not be] used as an excuse for instability in the individual,” but rather accentuates “the disaster of a personality that cannot hold together.”\textsuperscript{13} In discussing human instincts as neither inherently bad nor good, but rather dependent upon proper cultivation, he declaims egotism while rooting altruism in a proper love of self, arguing that “Jesus’ principle . . . is psychologically unassailable: Unless a man knows how to love himself well, he will have neither criterion nor means for loving his neighbor.”\textsuperscript{14} Concerning human evils, he contends that, “Not to be depressed by such public calamities as afflict mankind would reveal an insensitive spirit. In this sense depression is in order,” while maintaining that “the more depressing the time, the more people are needed who maintain their morale in spite of it and attack life with constructive courage,” who “are not merely mirrors to

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\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 186.
\textsuperscript{13} Fosdick, \textit{Real Person}, 108.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 174-175.
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reflect a tragic situation but personas who have their say concerning the meaning of that situation to themselves and others.” He admits “that fine-grained, socially-minded, well-integrated personalities face a society that is unjust and cruel.” These individuals “find their best ethical values and insights outraged by social disorder,” to which “they refuse to become well adjusted. To war, to the evils of predatory economics, to racial prejudice, totalitarian dictatorship, or whatever other social ill confronts them, they refuse comfortably to adjust themselves.” In sum, Fosdick sees the task of becoming a real person as one of “opening oneself in the depths of one’s personality to such faiths, loves, and loyalties, that one’s ethical quality inevitably comes from living up to them and out from them.” That is, the selfhood of real personality, once it has developed, is a social gospel self.

Though the development of personality is a task universally necessary and achievable “in mansion and hovel,” “wealth and penury,” however, Fosdick’s articulation of that task was perhaps not as universally accessible as he thought. While Hedstrom notes that Fosdick’s “language stayed straightforward throughout,” and that it was “never abstruse, arcane, or technical,” Miller quotes contemporary reviewer and psychologist Seward Hiltner as considering the book excellent, “but apparently not suitable for those below the college level.” Fosdick’s examples exude an unconscious class sensibility, as well. In discussing the variable temperaments of unintegrated people in different situations, he describes them as, “Polite today, morose and uncivil tomorrow; obliging and well-bred in business, crabbed, churlish, and sulky at home; affable with one’s so-

15 Ibid., 195.
16 Ibid., 206.
17 Ibid., 227.
18 Hedstrom, Rise of Liberal Religion, 185; Miller, Harry Emerson Fosdick, 276.
called ‘equals,’ gruff and snobbish with one’s servants; a good sportsman on the golf links, an ill-natured jostler in the subway.”¹⁹ In a similar vein, Fosdick writes of channeling humanity’s innate aggression for constructive purposes, advising that the “fighting spirit expresses itself not only in unreasoning anger, quarrelsomeness, hatred, and violence, but in competitive sports, in mountain-climbing, in hard work, in the brave facing of personal hazards and handicaps, and in the whole range of attack on entrenched social evils.”²⁰ Engaging the social gospel aims of transforming social structures is thereby placed alongside strenuous physical exertion as an activity in which one might elect to engage as a means of developing one’s personality into that of a real person.

For Fosdick, being a real person meant refusing to adjust oneself to systemic evils—predatory economics, racial prejudice, even blind acceptance of conventional moral codes—that deform personality. In articulating this concept in book form, as Hedstrom has convincingly demonstrated, On Being a Real Person manifested a core conviction of American liberal religion, namely, that “reading books of spiritual value prepared the reader for much grander struggles: fighting fascism and communism and living successfully in an increasingly pluralistic democracy.”²¹ The position of non-adjustment entailed within becoming a real person, a social gospel self, thus simultaneously implied a posture of adjustment—to book culture, to broadcast media, to Victorian aesthetic sensibilities, to the system of production and dissemination through

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¹⁹ Fosdick, Real Person, 36-37.
²⁰ Ibid., 160.
²¹ Hedstrom, Rise of Liberal Religion, 168.
which such goods were distributed, to psychological expertise as mediated and authorized through the language of religion.

In return for this adjustment, the consumer and practitioner of the type of religion represented by Fosdick and Riverside—that is to say, of the social gospel as channeled through liberal theology, philosophical personalism, and the mechanisms of mass culture—received, or had reinforced, a sense of agency to negotiate and even to address bewildering social circumstances. In part, this was what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has called, referring to the realm of politics, “the right to speak,” the sense that one is “entitled to claim a ‘personal opinion,’ or even the authoritative opinion which is the monopoly of the competent.” It involved the creation and reproduction of class distinctions between those empowered by the social gospel to act benevolently and those on the receiving end of that benevolence—even, in the case of Riverside, apparently obscuring the numbers of those from within the congregation who were receiving employment and other assistance—and may help to explain the lack of class diversity at Riverside which Fosdick noted and rued. But it also furnished a rich religious resource for those whom the tide of social and economic upheaval threatened to overwhelm.

This dissertation has sought to examine the contours of that social gospel. The initial inquiry that drove my research revolved around the question of how the Great Depression impacted the social gospel. An earlier generation of scholarship—even those who rejected the conventional wisdom that the social gospel had been left to bleed to death in the trenches of World War I—focused largely on the statements and actions of ecumenical organizations that took shape among mainline Protestant denominations.

Some contemporary scholarship, like that of Michael Janson, likewise seeks to demonstrate ways in which ecumenical organizations influenced public policy.\textsuperscript{23} Other recent scholarship on liberal Protestantism documents ways and mechanisms by which American religious liberalism has overflowed from, or developed outside the boundaries of, Protestantism.\textsuperscript{24} My aim, rather, has been to utilize a prominent preacher and his congregation as a lens through which to examine how the social gospel was deployed by and meaningful to those who remained within liberal expressions of Protestantism.

The chapters of this dissertation have provided multiple vantage points from which to proceed with my inquiry. One element that has shown itself in each approach has been the irony of the liberal social gospel’s dependence upon the mechanisms of capital for its existence. Fosdick’s message first garnered widespread attention as it was dispersed through the flows of print media; that attention was enhanced and complemented through Fosdick’s participation in the new medium of radio broadcasting. Network authorities partnered with religious programming like Fosdick’s in order to draw on religious leaders’ authority in order to help bolster their medium’s legitimacy, while Fosdick found himself able to harness the radio to connect with his audience in a new way. Similarly, it is clear both that Fosdick’s ability to utilize the structures of media


to disseminate his message enhanced his standing among influential Protestant laypeople like John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and that without the latter’s wealth, there would have been no Riverside Church constructed on Morningside Heights. Finally, Riverside’s Sewing Room and its Emergency Employment Service mirrored relief efforts that had been spurred by some of New York City’s business leaders, and drew on connections with business owners in order to function. The social gospel in its second iteration, as was true of its first, critiqued capitalism’s excesses and abuses while working within its boundaries to seek reform.

Yet, this project is not merely one of irony or of social gospel decline and failure, for it is also clear that the personalism that so deeply influenced much of its articulation, as exemplified by Fosdick, provided a rich resource for understanding and acting within the social world. It has become something of a truism that the therapeutic culture of which Fosdick’s work is undeniably a tributary has eroded a sense of community and responsibility for the greater good. But the social gospel as channeled through Fosdick’s personalism and manifested within the Riverside Church offered means of self-understanding and impetus for social engagement. Whereas the society that was both shaped by and reflected in mass media could be disorienting and depersonalizing, Fosdick’s articles, books, and sermons helped to name and speak to his audiences’ deepest concerns, and his voice broadcast into the personal space of homes created a sense of stability and intimacy. While the Riverside Church building offered visual

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allusion to and spatial utilization which mirrored bureaucratized, vertical, urban
skyscraper society, it also hearkened to the institutional church movement and created
domestic-style space in which the development of personal relationships were key to
organizational ethos. For their clients, the Sewing Room and Emergency Employment
Service utilized the methods of bureaucracy in order to reconnect individuals with
employment opportunities as means both of material support and of morale boosting. For
their volunteers and those who supported them in any manner, they offered a concrete
means of acting upon their impulses to heal a hurting world. And, especially because of
their partnership with public agencies, they allowed the church to conceive of itself as
presenting to the state a Christian witness of what humane social service ought to look
like.

Perhaps, then, there is an element of misdirection in attempts to periodize the
social gospel. Earlier historiography sought to erect its headstone at the World War I
marker; more recently, Ellen Blue has argued that the social gospel remained strong
through the 1920s but began to wane after government took on roles in the New Deal that
churches had traditionally enacted.26 Yet, following Janson on the social gospel and other
recent scholars on religious liberalism, it is clear that the tenets of social activism and of
personal well being which Fosdick so skillfully interwove in his articulation of the social
gospel remain embedded within portions of American culture. It may thus be more
helpful to conceive of the social gospel as a distinctive phenomenon in several different
eras—and the era of the Great Depression, which also overlapped with an era of new
mass media and mass production, is striking in the way it shifted from, while maintaining

26 Ellen Blue, St. Mark’s and the Social Gospel: Methodist Women and Civil Rights in New Orleans,
continuity with, its initial iteration arising from the intersecting issues of urbanization, industrialization, and immigration. This new version was tied to its past, but more consciously harnessed the concepts of and concerns for personality as a means of encouraging constructive action and salving anxiety in the face of global turmoil. As seen in Fosdick’s message, its various modes of reception, the utilization of the Riverside building, and the congregational response to the unemployment crisis, the social gospel as grounded in personalism allowed its middle class consumers to negotiate tremendous upheaval within their social and economic world, to find religious meaning and purpose amid personal and social suffering, and to retain some sense of agency, control, and participation in a world that seemed overtaken by massive and overwhelming systemic problems.
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