

# Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition

Gary Dorrien

Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics,  
Union Theological Seminary  
Professor of Religion, Columbia University

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*For James Cone Eminent theologian and treasured friend*

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*Social Gospel in Black and White: American Racial Reform, 1885-1912* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

This book is a byproduct of my work at Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University as a teacher to graduate students and, especially, a mentor to doctoral students. Shortly after I moved to New York in 2005 and began working with doctoral students in social ethics, it occurred to me that we lacked a history of the field they were entering. Every field should have an account of its origins, development, key figures, methodological options, and theoretical varieties, I thought. Meeting with one of my doctoral advisees, Christine Pae, I mused that perhaps my next project would be a history of social ethics; Christine replied, "Could you hurry up and write it? I'll be doing my comprehensive exams next year."

That suggested an impossibly ambitious timeline, but I soon plunged into the research for this book, and taught a course titled "Social Ethics as a Discipline" that mapped out the book's narrative structure. I am deeply grateful to all of the master's and doctoral degree students in that course for enriching my perspective on this subject. Above all, I am grateful to my current group of doctoral students - Lisa Anderson, Malinda Berry, Chloe Breyer, Ian Doescher, Babydoll Kennedy, Jeremy Kirk, Eboni Marshall, David Orr, Christine Pae, Gabriel Salguero, Charlene Sinclair, Joe Strife, Rima Veseley-Flad, and Demian Wheeler. The privilege of working with these gifted, fascinating, and promising scholars has been the most rewarding experience of my academic career.

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genial gift for friendship. The third friend, Joe Hough, is retiring from the presidency of Union Seminary as this book goes to press. Union Theological Seminary in its long and noted history has never had a better president than Joe Hough, nor a more remarkable human being. All of us in the Union community wish him fond farewell and will miss him desperately.

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# ***Introduction***

In the early 1880s, proponents of what came to be called “the social gospel” founded what came to be called “social ethics.” This book is a history of the tradition of social ethics of the USA, a tradition that began with the distinctly modern idea that Christianity has a social-ethical mission to transform the structures of society in the direction of social justice.

The simultaneous rise of the social gospel and social ethics was not coincidental, nor the fact that sociology, “social justice,” social Darwinism, corporate capitalism, modern socialism, and the trade unions arose at the same time. For social ethics was essentially a departmental subset of the social gospel. The social gospel was novel for its idea of social salvation. Social salvation was based on the sociological idea of social structure. The term “social justice” gained currency in the literature of rising Socialist and union movements. And the social gospelers had to figure out how to affirm Darwinism as science while rejecting an ascending social Darwinism. By the 1890s the favored shorthand for all of this was “the social problem,” to which social ethics brought the resources of a socially awakened Christianity.

This book describes the founding and development of social ethics as a discourse in the realms of the academy, church, and general public. It explains and analyzes the three major traditions of social ethics, offshoots of these traditions, evangelical and neoconservative alternatives, and various confessional and cultural standpoints from which religious thinkers have construed the social meaning of Christianity, all in a narrative fashion.

Nearly from the beginning, “social ethics” named a specific academic field and a way of thinking about Christian