Immigrants, Methodists and a “Conservative” Social Gospel, 1865-1908

by Philip D. Jordan

Traditional Methodist historiography highlights 1908 as a watershed in the stream of denominational social philosophy, for in that year the Methodist Episcopal Church issued a creed which ranked it permanently among the twentieth century leaders of the social gospel. Extensive literature treats Church evolution from what I consider a moderately conservative theological and individualistic social orientation towards a liberal Christian concern for the urban poor and related problems. Yet most scenarios of this Methodist emergence ignore the ironic elements of the drama. If mainline Methodism had become so liberal, then why did she simultaneously renounce that time-honored principle of American democratic ideology, an open door to the immigrant? Does this represent a minor blemish on the sunswept decks of the new Methodist liberalism or is it the airy thrust of a more conservative hull?

Comprehension of this Methodist social drama requires that we pay attention to its historic content. What, for example, was that nineteenth century social stance which altered so dramatically in the twentieth? Part of the answer relates to the Methodist response to the Civil War. Like the northern Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed and other evangelical bodies, the Methodist Episcopal Church supported the Union cause so enthusiastically that victory seemed to justify a common agenda for the missions of church and nation. Methodism accordingly participated in the evangelical Religion of the Republic expressed so clearly in that very popular wartime message which Bishop Matthew Simpson revised and presented repeatedly to enthusiastic postwar Methodist audiences.

Simpson’s original “War Message” told crowds of cheering thousands that “if the world is to be elevated and raised to its proper place . . . God cannot afford to do without America.” His postwar version predicted a great increase in American world power due to free immigration and social mobility, two forces within American society which, I might add, attracted and
rewarded talent and achievement. Moreover, the public school system would strengthen the country by teaching English to our many nationalities so that "the English tongue would become the diplomatic language of the globe." Most important of all in Simpson's view, the national mission obliged America to teach the world the wisdom of republican government. Clearly, he could agree with the postwar statement by Wesleyan University President Cyrus D. Foss that "the August Ruler of all the nations designed the United States of America as the grand repository and evangelist of civil liberty and of pure religious faith. And the two are one."1

Simpson, Foss and their Methodist respondents could show such great enthusiasm because they participated in a national evangelical identity which in part rested on the key elements of democratic ideology—using Ralph Henry Gabriel's terms, they are the moral and natural forms of the fundamental law, the free and responsible individual and the American mission. Successful intrusion of evangelicalism into public schools, orphanages, prisons, Indian reservations and other agencies enabled them to assume that their Christian civilization rested on an evangelical foundation whose pillars were religious and civil liberty. Abolition of slavery and subsequent Union victory clearly meant God approved their mission to transmit worldwide both human freedom and individual responsibility under God's moral law. Evangelicalism, and, in this case, Methodism and democracy were thought so inseparable that all major changes in Methodist policy during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were intended to foster this Religion of the Republic. In this sense, the Methodist Episcopal Church took conservative ground even after accepting the social gospel, for to be conservative involves retention of past ideas and behavior patterns thought relevant to the present. The Church's goal was the complete conversion of America to evangelicalism and the transmission of that faith and democratic context to the world. 2


2 Such concepts as the fundamental law, free and responsible individual and American mission involve a constellation of ideas and historical precedent. The early nineteenth century originators of our democratic ideology believed the universe rested on a
Clearly the homefront was crucial towards achieving the world goal, but unexpectedly, the opposite to Christianization of culture occurred. Postwar Methodism, and evangelicalism as a whole, became so acculturated that it accepted the laissez faire, competitive, individualistic, free enterprise system and classical economics theory as the moral order of things. That Methodism gained middle class status only recently meant the merits of hard work, frugality and private property, as well as the individual right of contract, were particularly apparent. The postwar Church consequently supported the social and economic status quo. Given current Methodist “revivalistic” theology, sin was sufficient explanation for most social problems, while individual redemption constituted the remedy. The precepts of Methodist moralism focused on such personalist duties as sabbath observance, temperance and avoidance of frivolous amusements. Methodists accordingly clung to Wesley’s individualism while partially losing contact with his concern over the physical well-being of his parishioners. ³

Certainly modern biblical criticism, evolutionary theory, and elements of the physical and social sciences upset Methodists by generating skepticism about their more traditional religious perspectives. But like most evangelicals of the 1870’s and 1880’s,
their overall complacency melted finally in the cauldron of social turmoil and labor’s rejection of organized Christianity. Industrial society consequently presented rural and mill-town oriented Methodism with three interrelated problems. The rise of organized labor and business with their accompanying strikes, price wars and socio-economic disruptions confronted the Church with the need to reappraise its position concerning the economic foundations of society. Secondly, Methodism had to adjust to the great tangle of religious and social needs of the modern city. And finally, Methodists found themselves rethinking the relationship between asylum for the oppressed and talented and the future of the American Republic. They were forced to reassess the social and religious dimensions of their evangelical and democratic faith.\(^4\)

That the postwar Methodist Episcopal Church showed some social concern may be seen in its strenuous efforts to educate and aid freed Negroes, as well as to counteract racism during the remainder of the century. Still, postwar Episcopal Addresses and General Conference activities dealt mainly with such issues as jurisdiction over abandoned Methodist churches in the South and demands of laymen for representation within the General Conference. The Church of the 1870’s also worried about the growing immorality of the cities as shown by their numerous theatres, dance halls and saloons and by the general decline in individual character and homelife. By the 1880’s, the Episcopal Address invariably explained the poverty of the urban lower class as a consequence of intemperance. As the *Western Christian Advocate* editorialized, “the prohibition reform. . . . is the key to

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all other moral reforms—the indispensable condition precedent to their success.”

During this period, major publications like the *Christian Advocate* and *Methodist Quarterly Review* remained silent about urban and industrial problems. Prominent Methodist layman and religious editor for the *Independent*, Henry King Carroll did arouse controversy because of his claims in 1877 that Methodism was failing in the cities relative to rural success but his solution required zealous evangelism rather than a new Methodist social program. Even as late as 1886, the only criticism aimed at capital in the *Review* involved editorial condemnations of some businessmen and corporations for being motivated by greed rather than brotherly love. The editors did object to the corporation’s impersonal treatment of laborers as mere tools, thereby precipitating labor organization, but still thought individual sin the cause of business inequity, while intemperance was the greatest evil of the day.

Methodist concern for the Blacks during the late nineteenth century is very important. Indeed, Ralph E. Luker’s argument—in “The Social Gospel and the Failure of Racial Reform, 1887-1898,” *Church History*, 46 (March, 1977), 80-99—about voluntary society missions to the Black in the postwar South would appear to apply equally to Methodist Episcopal mission and educational activities in that region. Luker thinks the concern of antebellum reform and abolitionist societies to attain cultural unity, civil equity and racial reform, continued unabated after the war in northern evangelical missions to the South and was the elemental foundation of the late century rural-urban social gospel movement.

The point of my essay, however, is less to define the nature of the social gospel than to show the clearly conservative intent of the Methodist Episcopal Church in its use of social Christianity to save the souls and treat the bodies of urban folk, primarily immigrants, in order to preserve the evangelical and democratic culture of America. Luker and my arguments converge at this juncture—barbarism was the primary danger to which the social gospel responded. It is no accident that the home mission pleas of Lyman Beecher [*A Plea for the West; 2nd ed.* (Cincinnati: Truman & Smith, 1835)] and Horace Bushnell [*Barbarism, the First Danger*, Vol. I, WORK AND PLAY (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1912)] reappeared in Josiah Strong’s reworking of the American Home Missionary Society tract, *Our Country: Number Two, A Plea for Home Missions* (New York: American Home Missionary Society, 1858) as *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (New York: The Baker & Taylor, Co., 1885, 1891). They all participated in the deeply rooted nineteenth century evangelical concern that a potentially barbaric America, whether due to homegrown or foreign immigrant influences, be Christianized and civilized as the first step in fulfilling their national Christian and democratic mission to the world.

If the *Review* explained haltingly the reason for the labor union, the 1888 Address of the Bishops appears more representative of Methodists by judging the union a foreign evil. It supposedly placed “millions of laborers compactly organized under leadership liable to become unscrupulous, chafing under real or fancied grievances” and threatening to the political stability and welfare of the nation. Ironically, Methodists thought union men neither free nor responsible because union dynamics denied two rights which antebellum Methodist abolitionists fought to attain for man irrespective of race, the right to work for the employer and for the wages of one’s choice. This contrast is important because the *Review* and the more liberal Methodists to whom it allocated some space—men such as Frank Mason North, George P. Mains, and C. M. Morse—foraged ahead of the Church in appreciation for labor unions and urban problems. A *Review* editorial of 1891 even argued labor had as much right to organize as the financier, politician or theologian. In different vein, the Rev. C. M. Morse questioned the Methodist assumption that conversion regenerated a person to where he became more socially concerned. Experience showed Morse that the Church must stress the sociological teachings of the Bible, the moral law if you wish, and their social application in order to curb ruthless Methodist businessmen. Both Morse and Frank Mason North bemoaned capitalist abandonment of that historic Christian brotherhood now revived by socialism. Obviously, the Church should guide social reform.7

Hawley, “Relations of Politics and Christianity,” MR, LXI (1879), 460-476, but its impact was slight. Declaring “avarice” the “master passion” of American civilization because Christianity so eulogized hard work and frugality that acquisition of wealth became a social virtue, the editors in 1886 bemoaned Church failure to censure unChristian means to wealth: “the ruthless seizure and control of the highways of continental traffic, the rape of the world’s mineral wealth, the fruits of discovery and invention made the instruments of oppression and ministers of greed.” (ed.), “Christianity’s Next Problem,” MR, LXVIII (1886), 597-603; (ed.), “Christianity’s Next Problem,” MR, LXVIII (1886), 768-73. Also see: (ed.), “Christianity and the Ethics of the Business World,” MR, LXX (1888), 452-59. 


The earliest apparently liberal memorial concerning organized labor was introduced by future Bishop William F. Mallalieu before the General Conference but never got out of the Committee on the State of the Church, *MEC, Journal*, 1884, p. 135.
By 1892, the New York East Conference—seat of social gospel leaders like Frank Mason North and future bishop Herbert Welch—began a long-term campaign of memorializing the General Conference to take liberal ground on social issues. Church resistance to social Christianity was high in 1892. The Bishops' Address reemphasized brotherly love as the "panacea for all the social and moral evils" which afflict society. Clearly, it argued, the rich man ought to practice stewardship and the poor man patience, for the latter would have the easiest road to heaven. Despite efforts by men like North and Morse, the bishops of 1896 accepted arbitration in labor disputes but refused to endorse labor unions. Instead, they issued an individualistic, middle-class social creed which contrasts sharply with that twelve years later:

... we think these positions are grounded on justice and right:
   Every man has a right to acquire property by the legitimate means of activity, foresight, invention, and inheritance. . . .
   Every man has a right to the profit of his own labor. In that respect he is a capitalist.
   No man has a right to use his labor to oppress his fellowmen.
   Every free man has a right to refuse to work for another.
   No man has a right to prevent another from working when and for whom he will.
   Every man is accountable to God for the use of his time, labor, and their outcome—wealth. 8

Although the Bishops did suggest business ought to practice profit sharing with workers, the overall thrust of this address was most upsetting to Methodist liberals. Progressive reform memorials from the New York East and other Conferences remained in committee. 9

Even as late as 1900, the bishops insisted the Church was "neither appointed nor fitted to dictate social or economic laws,"

8 "Address of the Bishops," MEC, Journal, 1896, pp. 59, 58. C. H. Hopkins sees this as the first serious attempt to bring social issues to the attention of the General Conference. Hopkins, op. cit., p. 289. In actuality, it is the first to stress the need for a liberal and urban social Christianity. All of the previous memorials concerning immigration, Black education, etc., deal clearly with social issues. They show that Methodist social concern existed since the Civil War and bring into question any stereotyped definition of social gospel.

The bishops' argument concerning stewardship by the wealthy and patience by the poor parallels that of contemporary Roman Catholics in America. See Cardinal Gibbons' comments in Our Christian Heritage (Baltimore: John Murphy & Co., 1889), pp. 387-88.

that character was the "supreme sphere of the Church," and that the Church's "unchanging and adequate message. . . [would] save the individual and thereby save society." Still, the groundswell of Methodist social gospel agitation did have effect, for the bishops pledged the Church to impartiality in capital-labor disputes, regretted the loss of the poor, and charged the General Conference to find an appropriate remedy. Expressing sympathy for the common people despite labor's "blunders," the Episcopal Address of 1904 wished them "success in every lawful effort to better their condition and secure their rights." The Church thus had evolved from an anti-union position in 1888 to an official admission that labor had a right to organize and that its goals were just.¹⁰

This change in attitude towards labor-industrial problems related closely to the urbanization of Methodist social consciousness. The Review ignored urban problems until 1888 when the Rev. E. D. McCreary, taking an inherently social gospel stance, attacked the uptown movement of the wealthier churches for depriving the masses of spiritual and physical sustenance. Rather, Methodists ought to so locate the churches that their expanded functions and continuous evangelism could save the people. The Bishops' Address responded by implored Methodists to coordinate their slum missions through local church alliances. Progressive Methodists of the 1890's, however, doubted whether evangelism alone solved urban inequities. Some, like the Rev. Herbert Carson, grew impatient and withdrew from the Church to form independent congregations supportive of social gospel and labor unions. Most, like Frank Mason North and George P. Mains, remained loyal but plunged into the institutional church movement as a partial solution to the great social needs of the urban poor.¹¹

Consequently, in 1893, North attacked the poverty, rackrenting, sweatshops, and barbaric laissez-faire economic system which crushed the people of the Fifth Ward and Mulberry


Bend, New York City. He praised the Methodist Epworth League, deaconess and institutional church movements for trying to meet the problem but demanded they cease being “ecclesiastical and edificatory” and become “evangelistic and humanitarian.” Clearly, North thought human misery fell under the mantle of the gospel because poverty lay “very close to the problem of sin.” Its urban form was “a crowding, brutalizing, crushing horror which makes one sneer at civilization and wonder if God has forgotten to be just.” North was certain the Church could “recast the life of the wretched poor of our cities” through recourse to law and rejection of false social teaching. Editorials in the Review picked up these themes and stressed the need for Church study of the sociological problems of the day to determine their solution.

Mains held thoughts similar to North but, like McCreary, stressed the need for massive institutional church activity. Responding to the challenge, Methodists used their church extension societies to consolidate inner city congregations into powerful institutional churches, a method established previously by the British Wesleyan Forward Movement’s Church Extension Fund. The American bishops endorsed the National City Evangelization Union in 1892, while subsequently warning the Conference of 1896 that

... Methodism in our cities should be slow to abandon what are called downtown populations because of changes from native to foreign, and rich to poor. The greater the change the more need of our remaining. Combine the plants, if need be; adapt them and the services to the new surroundings, but remain and save the people.

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Such efforts were reinforced by the deaconess movement. Originally designed to mobilize young Christian women for strictly religious service, Methodist deaconesses like Jane M. Bancroft and Louise Golder gained General Conference recognition in 1888 for their numerous hospitals, orphanages, old people’s homes and slum settlement houses. They became so important that the General Conference of 1900 authorized the bishops to transfer all such institutions to deaconess control.  

The significance of what originally were unofficial city evangelization unions, church extension societies, deaconess movements and individual institutional churches has been underrated by prominent historians of the social gospel. Henry F. May, for example, thought the Episcopal Addresses and General Conference pronouncements sufficient proof to conclude that “only in the early twentieth century, . . . did Methodists contribute to the Social Gospel Movement in proportion to their numbers, discipline and fervency.” To the contrary, that the Methodist Episcopal Church of 1908 could adopt the most influential denominational social creed of the day testified to over two decades of activity by laymen, clergy and even bishops in the cause of the social gospel.  

E. James. The 1908 General Conference required the Church Extension and Home Missions boards to cooperate with NCEU to facilitate efforts of social Christians in the cities. “Address of the Bishops,” MEC Journal, 1892, pp. 460-61; MEC Journal, 1908, pp. 615-18.

May’s generalization roots in faulty methodology. He rests his case concerning the decentralized Congregationalists and Unitarians on individual congregations and clergymen while assuming that centralized Methodism can be judged by its Episcopal Addresses and General Conference statements alone. This led him to ignore the very active and large-scale efforts of Methodists outside of Church and bureaucratic governing channels. May, op. cit., pp. 189-90. An exception to this criticism is Aaron I. Abell whose focus on pragmatic social gospel programs reveals the massive dimensions of Methodist activities in the late nineteenth century.

As far as individual bishops supportive of the social gospel are concerned, please note that 10 bishops, 2 editors, and 2 very prominent Methodist clergymen, a total of 14, represented various Methodist denominations among the 85 signatories to the Evangelical Alliance “Call for the Washington Conference” (1887). The Call catapulted the Alliance to national leadership in the social gospel. The following Methodist Episcopal clergy signed the Call and supported the subsequent Alliance programs: (1) Bishops Edward G. Andrews, William L. Harris, John F. Hurst, Thomas Bowman, Cyrus D. Foss, Randolph S. Foster; (2) future bishop John H. Vincent, editor James M. Buckley and James M. King.

These unofficial programs, therefore, were the proving grounds where men and women like Harry F. Ward, Frank Mason North, Jane Bancroft, Worth M. Tippy, George P. Mains and Louise Golder confronted the inequities of the American economic and social system without being held back by the much slower denominational structure. From the 1880's to 1907, they organized the social gospel outside ordinary denominational channels and then piecemeal managed to get official sanction for their efforts. Through intensive propaganda campaigns they gradually won the Methodist Episcopal Church to their cause. Their campaign achieved unity and strength after Tippy visited the Wesleyan Union for Social Service in England, studied its methods and goals, and returned to America determined to establish a similar organization. Correspondence between Tippy, North, Ward, Herbert Welch and Elbert R. Zaring led to the December 1907 Washington Conference which founded the Methodist Federation for Social Service.16

Their cumulative efforts achieved stunning success in 1908 when the Methodist Episcopal Church took the lead nationally in denominational social gospel concern. The Episcopal Address focused nearly one-third of its space on such social questions as child labor laws, greater protection from industrial accidents and fairer treatment of those injured. It even endorsed labor unions, although the individual still had the right to stay out of them. The General Conference, in turn, passed the "Report on the State of the Church." The Report authorized the appointment of three bishops to the Methodist Federation, thereby bringing it into semi-official connection to the Church, but more importantly, made the Federation's Social Creed Methodist policy—it would also become the core of the Social Creed of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ. This Methodist Creed focused almost exclusively on the rights and conditions of labor, recommending changes in the economic system ranging from arbitration to child labor laws.17


17 As a first step toward greater concern for human welfare, the Bishops asked the General Conference to reconsider the benefits and salaries of church personnel. "Episcopal Address," MEC, Journal, 1908, pp. 134-38. That the Methodist social gospel at this
IMMIGRANTS, METHODISTS AND A "CONSERVATIVE" GOSPEL

Declaring that the goals of organized labor “are essentially ethical, and, therefore should command the support of Christian men,” the Report charged the Methodist Federation with the design of an appropriate social reform strategy for the Church. Ironically, Federation arguments and evidence which taught the Church its Christian duty towards the urban poor also highlighted the foreign nature of slum populations. The very Bishops’ Address which endorsed the social gospel, in the name of a new Christian liberality, withdrew from an earlier liberal and democratic commitment by rejecting implicitly an open door to immigrants. This altered perception of the nature of democracy parallels that of the other major evangelical denominations. Immigration restriction would help to preserve American democratic and Christian civilization by decreasing cultural heterogeneity, while alleviating the sufferings of the poor through reduction of labor wage

juncture in time was preeminently concerned with the rights and conditions of labor may be shown best by full quotation of the Creed:

The Methodist Church stands:

For equal rights and complete justice for all men in all stations of life.

For the principle of conciliation and arbitration in industrial dissensions.

For the protection of the worker from dangerous machinery, occupational diseases, injuries, and mortality.

For the abolition of child labor.

For such regulation of the conditions of labor for women as shall safeguard the physical and moral health of the community.

For the suppression of the 'sweating system.'

For the gradual and reasonable reduction of the hours of labor to the lowest practical point, with work for all; and for that degree of leisure for all which is the condition of the highest human life.

For a release for employment one day in seven.

For a living wage in every industry.

For the highest wage that each industry can afford, and for the most equitable division of the products of industry that can ultimately be devised.

For the recognition of the Golden Rule and the mind of Christ as the supreme law of society and the sure remedy for all social ills.


As John Milton Huber correctly points out, the Methodist Federation for Social Service sought and received a semi-autonomous relation with the Church wherein it had the recognition of official connection—three appointed bishops on its board—but the advantages of forging ahead without hindrance by the more conservative church bureaucracy. The General Conference of 1912 nevertheless provided such encouragement that the Federation created the position of full-time secretary, for the Chicago stockyards pastor and social activist Harry F. Ward, and advanced a Bishop, Francis J. McConnell, to succeed Herbert Welch as President. The Federation subsequently precipitated quite a furor by championing the rights of laborers working for the Methodist Book Concern before the 1916 General Conference. A two-day debate led the Conference to order the Book Concern to participate in collective bargaining with labor unions which operated according to Christian principles. Huber, op. cit., pp. 59, 93-97, 106-112, 297-99.
competition. In the latter case, the Church finally accepted labor union claims that workers could receive a living wage only through combination aimed at restriction of labor competition. Deploiring the mistreatment of the Chinese and Japanese in America, the bishops of 1908 accordingly recognized "the dangers to the American civilization and especially to the wages of the laboring classes, if the immense populations of Eastern Asia were free to enter this country with habits of living which are hardly possible to the last extremity of American poverty." Such statement actually represents a much broader willingness to allow restriction of both European and Oriental immigration.18

But, one may ask, what was the nature of the originally liberal position on immigration which the Methodist Episcopal Church so dramatically altered by 1908? Part of the answer roots in Methodist agreement with the democratic and Christian millennialism of Bishop Simpson's "War Message." That the march of military boots was soon replaced by the renewed annual tramp of hundreds of thousands of immigrants passing through American portals caused considerable rejoicing because of their potential for Christian harvest: convert the aliens, imbue them with love of liberty, equality and other American verities and the ensuing volume of letters and return visits to the motherlands would till the


As seen in note 17, the church of 1916 continued this endorsement of organized labor groups operating on Christian principles. The theme that unions were elementally Christian because they operated along the lines of brotherhood—a basic element of the social gospel "brotherhood under the fatherhood of God" formula—proved quite popular to Methodist social Christians. Elected Bishop in 1908, one-time labor union member Robert McIntyre subsequently reacted with bitterness against Church doubts towards labor:

Judge the union by its best, not by its worst. . . . Labor is beset with bitter conditions. To fling censure is easy, and gelatinous essays concocted from a denatured Bible are useless. The Church at any cost should keep near the union, the clergy should join it, speak of it . . . be slow to criticize and quick to minister.

way for missionaries to plant the seeds of Methodism and American civilization worldwide. Postwar Methodists therefore engaged in intensive foreign and home missionary work.19

Their most successful home efforts were a continuation of the prewar programs set up by men like William Nast, among the Germans, and Olaf Hedstrom, among the Scandinavians. The use of converts as missionaries to their own language-culture group proved so effective that the 1868 report of the Committee on the State of the Church, for example, applauded that conversion and Americanization of the Germans which freed them from Romanism, infidelity, spiritless Protestant churchism, intemperance and other vices. Indeed, Americanization occurred at such a pace that convert leaders bemoaned the loss of members from their language conferences to the American Church.20

That the evangelicals believed deeply in American asylum for the oppressed also helps to explain why the Methodist Episcopal Church and other major denominations opposed American mistreatment of the Oriental during the last half of the nineteenth century. Methodist missionaries saw China as a vast field for American evangelism. Dreaming of a Protestant China, the editor of the *Christian Advocate* welcomed the visit of Chinese Ambassador Anson Burlingame as the "working of God's providence in exposing China to the benefits of 'the most Christian nation on the face of the earth.' "21

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19 The prosperous postwar Church greatly increased missionary efforts in such diverse places as Africa, Germany, Japan and Sweden. That it emphasized the civilizing role of the evangelical missionary may be seen in the argument of Rev. Thomas M. Eddy, Corresponding Secretary of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, before the Evangelical Alliance. His 1873 address however was more irenic than "Methodist" in spirit because he allowed all European and American evangelicals a role in this process. Eddy, "The Obligations of Literature, Science, and Commerce to Christian Missions," *Evangelical Alliance, History, Essays, Orations, and Other Documents of the Sixth General Conference of the Evangelical Alliance*, 1873 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1874), pp. 594-97.


The consequent Burlingame Treaty of 1868 allowed unrestricted Chinese immigration, much going to the Pacific West. From the 1850's to 1870, mineral and agricultural wealth allowed California a far higher standard of living than the rest of the nation. Although inexpensive Chinese labor helped to bring this about, California toleration of the Oriental ended when completion of the Central Pacific Railroad coupled the state with a nation soon to suffer the Panic of 1873. A flood of cheap manufacturers and eastern laborers sent the California economy reeling and led to outbursts against resident Chinese as the source of unemployment and economic collapse. That thousands of Chinese shifted from the completed railroad, thereby increasing competition in other areas of menial labor, merely added fuel to the fire. The Chinese were especially disliked by California labor unions because local manufacturers met the new eastern competition by relying more heavily on the less expensive Oriental worker. This situation worsened as the 1870's advanced due to a decline in the mining industry, the San Francisco Stock Market crash, and a series of droughts damaging to agriculture. Organized labor and European immigrants along the West Coast responded violently against the competitive Chinese. Union pressure obtained discriminatory labor laws against the Chinese in California and neighboring states, while western Congressmen carried the issue to the nation. So evenly matched were the national parties on the eve of the 1876 Hayes-Tilden Presidential election that a special congressional committee sped to investigate the California crisis.

As President of the Anti-Chinese Union, Cameron King told the Committee, the Chinese were the "absolute slaves of the contractors," a phrase requiring some comment. A few thousand laborers, brought from China by the Central Pacific to complete its portion of the transcontinental railroad, were contracted to repay the cost of their ocean voyage and to work for the railroad at reasonable wages. Most Chinese, like their European counter-


parts, came to America as individuals without prior obligation to American business. None were contract slaves. Nevertheless, King attempted to persuade the public that all of the Chinese worked under a form of contract-slavery at wages so low as to threaten the position of free white labor, and, by implication, the free and responsible individual, as the foundation of democracy. King played on racist fears by claiming that "the immoral and irreligious practices which the presence of such immense numbers of criminal, depraved and pagan residents foster and encourage; the pernicious example set before our youth by this lewd, gambling and lawless element; the crime and disease which they beget and engender" make them totally unacceptable. California's U.S. Senator Aaron A. Sargent agreed with King that the Chinese, "by dispensing with what have become the necessities of modern civilization," undermined the home, family, public school and other institutions essential to democracy. The safety of American civilization required restriction of Chinese immigration.

Sargent's arguments were echoed by an increasing labor chorus as the century waned and aroused such a responsive chord among Methodists that the bishops of 1908 accepted restriction of Oriental immigration to ensure a free American lifestyle for labor. The anti-Chinese violence and furor of the 1870's, however, angered a Methodist Episcopal Church opposed in principle to violence, racism and discrimination. Racial slurs aimed at the Chinese but reminiscent of antebellum slave-holder attitudes towards the Black, coupled with newer Darwinist and Anglo-Saxon imagery, convinced many Methodists that defense of the Chinese was essential to preservation of the Civil War victory over the slave power and Reconstruction in the South. Besides, the Methodist abolitionist heritage was at stake. Consequently, in 1870, the Rev. Daniel Curry of the Christian Advocate editorial-

23 U. S., Congress, Senate, Report of the Joint Special Committee to Investigate Chinese Immigration, Report No. 689, 44th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1876-1877 (Washington Government Printing Office, 1877), pp. 32-34, 12, iv-viii—henceforth cited as Report 689. For those Chinese contracted to the railroads, see Tso Chien Shen, What Chinese Exclusion Really Means (New York: Chinese Institute in America, 1942), pp. 11-20. King's position is even more complicated in that, despite his assertions to the contrary, he admitted the Chinese came voluntarily to America. Yet he and other labor and anti-Chinese leaders were convinced erroneously that the abducting of Chinese from the homeland to Peru and Cuba, as virtual slaves, was being reduplicated on American soil by business contract—only Chinese prostitutes were so treated. Cf.: S. Wells Williams, U. S. Consul to Peking, Report 689, pp. 1246-47; Report 689, pp. 1544-52; U. S., Congress, House, Letters from Consul Bailey to Davis, 43d Cong., 1st Sess., 1873-1874, House Exec. Doc. No. 1, pp. 203-08.
ized that dislike of the Chinese by such Roman Catholics as Dennis Kearney and Senator Sargent, although reprehensible, made sense given previous Irish Catholic animus toward the Black.

But what of the inconsistency of the men who, after fighting the good fight for abolition of African slavery and the enfranchisement of the black man, and who also have labored successfully to embody a cosmopolitan liberalism in the Constitution, are now resisting the application of its principles to one-half of the human race? Is it for nothing that our country has passed through its baptism of blood? that Congress and the people have labored and devised to reconstruct the national fabric on the basis of real and impartial freedom? and that at length we seemed to have reached a point in our affairs when the ground truths of our political system were about to be realized, . . . [only to discover that attacks on the Chinese immigrant represented] an assault upon the spirit of our whole political system. 24

That labor unions, themselves apparent denials of individual free choice, were major sources of anti-Chinese agitation, merely served to augment editorial and general Methodist resolve to aid the Chinese. Even so, more than principle was involved. Given its millennial hope, the Church feared the Chinese government might react by expelling missionaries or, much worse, by withdrawing protection from them.


American labor nationally opposed Chinese immigration from its beginning and soon sang a chorus against contract labor of all types—the notion was that immigrants used as strike-breakers, or those hired for much lower wages than usual, had to be under a slave-labor contract. How else could older immigrant-American workers explain the odd nature of competition from new immigrants? Labor therefore supported anti-Chinese immigration legislation nationally during the early 1880's as well as the passage of the Foran Act of 1885 against imported contract labor. For labor's anti-Chinese stance see: (1) Knights of Labor—John Swinton, The Chinese-American Question (New York: American News Company, 1870); Terence V. Powderly, Thirty Years of Labor (Columbus, Ohio: Excelsior Publishing House, 1890), pp. 412-13, 415-16. (2) AF of L: Samuel Gompers, Seventy Years of Life and Labor (N. Y.: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1925), vol. II, pp. 154-61; Mollie Ray Carroll, Labor and Politics (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1923), p. 118.
By 1881, the Rev. A. J. Hansen wrote in the *Review* that only the federal government could withstand current racial prejudice and had the authority to provide justice for those involved in the Chinese question. He attributed this racist furor to degraded immigrants like the "'Sand-Lotters'—a rabid, ignorant mob, mainly of foreigners, led by Dennis Kearney." Hansen praised the Chinese for adjusting to American culture despite the un-American restrictions imposed on them by the state of California. Accordingly, "the genius of our free institutions demands that we should make no distinction on account of race or nationality alone; that we should exclude no one on account of his color; and that we should extend to all who are willing to conform to American ideas and modes of life the same rights of residence and citizenship." To Hansen, justice required that any new "restrictions apply to Europeans and Asiatics alike." The General Conference of 1880 also expressed concern that the federal government enforce all rights guaranteed "by treaty to Chinese upon our shores and to afford them the protection which is accorded our citizens now residing within the bounds of the Chinese Empire." 25

That the Chinese population grew from 40,000 to 100,000 between 1860 and 1880, mostly in the West, merely served to increase racist fear of the Yellow Peril. Congress responded by restricting Chinese immigration in 1879. President Rutherford B. Hayes vetoed the bill as contrary to the Burlingame Treaty, but then bowed to pressure by renegotiating it. The new treaty of 1880 allowed the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act to suspend Chinese immigration for ten years and forbid their naturalization. The anti-Chinese uproar, however, failed to subside. Daniel Curry wrote an 1885 *Review* editorial rebuking the Republicans, the traditional Methodist party, as well as the Democrats for such things as anti-Chinese legislation and failure to protect the rights of southern Blacks. In 1886, the New York Conference condemned the continued violence against Chinese laborers in the West. The Conference called for the punishment of those foreigners ostensibly behind such brutality as well as for payment of an indemnity to China. Prayerfully, it hoped the gospel would prosper among the Chinese. The General Conference subsequently called for protection of Chinese rights and charged

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Methodism to use all of its resources to make certain that Americans treated the Chinese as brothers.26

By the 1890's, Methodists were extremely concerned about the Oriental problem. At last accepting restriction of undesirable Chinese, Hansen thought naturalization laws ought to treat European and Oriental alike by resting on "character, general fitness, long residence, and regenerated sympathies" rather than on race. Hence the 1892 New York and New York East Conferences attacked the Geary Bill before Congress as unjust as well as dangerous to missionaries in China. The New York Conference did hope "some general immigration law looking to the good character and law-abiding purpose of immigrants will be enacted which will apply equally to immigrants from all quarters." Characterizing the Geary Bill as "inexcusable and inhuman," the bishops asked the General Conference to petition Congress "not to consummate the evil proposed." This bill not only renewed the ten-year period of exclusion but stipulated that only whites could testify in the courts on behalf of the Chinese, thereby alienating Methodists further by invalidating "the testimony of persons of African descent." The General Conference accordingly condemned it as inconsistent with international comity; in violation of the spirit, if not the letter, of treaties between China and the United States; unnecessary, if not cruel; contrary to the genius of the spirit of free government; at variance with the privileges accorded to American citizens in China . . . and Congress is respectfully asked to so amend the law as to remove those objectionable features, and thus secure to Chinese persons resident among us the rights to which they are entitled alike by justice and humanity.27

Unfortunately, Congress passed the Geary Bill before the General Conference petition could be sent.


Ironically, labor and immigrant racism towards the Chinese boomeranged by reinforcing Methodist disillusionment arising from evangelistic and social gospel experience among European slum dwellers. Like most evangelical Americans of northern European stock, Methodists witnessed an incomprehensible gap during the 1880's between themselves and an urban poor recruited increasingly among Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Jewish peasants from southern and eastern Europe. Still, Methodist reaction to this "New Immigration" partook only superficially of the kind of nativism, or "intense opposition to an internal minority on the ground of its foreign (i.e., un-American) connections," that John Higham posits for this period. Granted that Methodists displayed fear of supposed Roman Catholic subversion of democracy, fear of European radicals and revolutionaries, and eventually a social Darwinist Anglo-Saxon racism. Granted even that unqualified bigotry and racism existed among some. Yet an undercurrent of Higham's nativist argument, and that of Ray Allen Billington's earlier *Protestant Crusade*, implies that American dislike of the immigrant involved unreasoning fear, at its best, or manipulative opportunism, at its worst. By implication, the educated Protestant leadership ought to have encouraged respect for Catholics, Jews and immigrants generally, but self-interest led to demagogic activity instead. Such a position portrays the immigrant leaders and followers as meek recipients of American abuse rather than as active agents whose own presuppositions were often hostile to those of their host culture. Clearly, late nineteenth century America witnessed a multisided culture conflict, whose actors were less villain than human, which intensified American and Methodist nationalist emphasis on the Religion of the Republic.28

Space does not allow for much elaboration on this topic of mutual immigrant-American perceptual polarity. Let it suffice to remind you that the "New Immigration" proved heavily Roman Catholic, in a century when Roman Catholicism became more conservative theologically and structurally. Religious authority

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and power increasingly centralized in Rome at a time when conservative churchmen opposed contemporary European tendencies towards democracy and separation of church and state. Reaction developed to the point where, in 1864, Pope Pius IX issued a *Syllabus of Errors* which, to Americans, implicitly denied their democratic faith by condemning liberalism, progress and modern civilization. The 1870 Vatican Council angered evangelicals further by endorsing a doctrine of Papal Infallibility which inherently rejected the Protestant stress on individual interpretation of the sole source of truth, of Scripture. Such religious background as well as culture shock in the New World reinforced immigrant alienation from America. In Robert Cross's words, "hostile to the Protestant majority, suspicious of governmental enterprise, and averse to the active, melioristic spirit of the times, these Catholics met secular culture so far as possible only on their own terms. Their Catholicism was the symbol as well as the seal of their separation from that culture." 29

Modern social psychology may explain cultural alienation, but Protestants of the nineteenth century lacked this insight and could only interpret Catholic aloofness from American culture as a prelude to destroying it. Ironically, attempts to reconcile immigrants to American democracy by the liberal American hierarchy received considerable Protestant approval, but the consequent conflict between hierarchy and conservative immigrants desiring change in American Catholicism and culture actually increased evangelical and Methodist perceptions of a Catholic danger. That conservative Catholics often called for submission of American government and institutions to Catholic authority simply fanned to white heat evangelical anger over the cultural adjustments necessitated by pluralism.

Methodists at first reacted confidently to this immigrant challenge. G. E. Hiller did warn in the *Christian Advocate* of 1880 that thousands of immigrant anarchists and subjects of the foreign Pontiff "have already helped to produce . . . intemperate, lawless

and rioting elements that are quite formidable." Methodist preeminence among Protestants, in numbers of urban parishioners and property, however, encouraged an episcopal optimism bulwarked further by the notion that American culture was so vitally Anglo-Saxon, as Abel Stevens suggested in 1883, that "foreign ideas and foreign language quickly melt away among us." 30

That such optimism began to wane in 1885 may be seen in reports from the Woman's Home Missionary Society. Founded in 1880 and recognized by the General Conference in 1884, the WHMS wished to aid women and children of all nationalities and races through deaconess activity, schools, missions and orphanages. Mrs. Rutherford B. Hayes, wife to the President of the United States and herself President of this Society, issued an 1881 report which applauded the numerous opportunities among immigrants. Similarly enthusiastic, the Rev. Isaac J. Lansing predicted the WHMS would "assimilate all these people to the ways of the Republic," thereby making the "purity, power, and sway of real Christianity in America . . . the most powerful ally of our missionaries abroad." 31

But one year of activity altered WHMS perceptions to the point where the Report of 1882 claimed such refuse came to America that the "work of the missionary and patriot is one," that is, to "mold them into harmony with our free institutions and Christian faith." By 1884, adverse feedback from Society missionaries led Corresponding Secretary Rust to warn against the danger of "Socialism and Communism and Mormonism and infidelity and Romanism pervading the whole social and governmental fabric." Hopefully, women could help save "this country for Christ as an agency in the salvation of the world." 32

In 1885, only five years since the original WHMS endorsement of immigration, President Mrs. Hayes charged incoming


31 Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1884, pp. 61-63, 43; WHMS, Report, 1884, p. 6. The original WHMS efforts were among Black freedwomen but soon expanded to women Indians, Mormons and immigrants everywhere.

immigrants were not "fitted for citizenship of a republic," while Frances E. Willard described these foreign elements as the peril of the day. Like Josiah Strong, William E. Dodge, Jr., and other evangelicals, Methodists desired increasingly to preserve intact the Protestant as well as democratic core of their civilization. As Frank C. Haddock wrote in 1887, "Christian ideas and practices, the Sabbath, the Church, individual freedom of thought, a system of education essentially republican, a popular sovereignty, and a theory of jurisprudence based upon common-law principles, all molded by Christian sentiments, constitute in that view the foundation work of the republic." All appeared threatened by the immigrant. The *Review* claimed the foreigner assimilated too slowly, while E. D. McCreary cautioned that the cities contained large numbers of foreign-born Roman Catholics, whose "prepossessions and bigotry render them almost wholly inaccessible to evangelizing influences." 33

That the bishops in 1888 condemned labor agitation as a foreign evil reflects the contemporary view that immigrants were the source of labor unions and unions of social turmoil. The abortive but violent railroad strikes of 1877 shattered temporarily middle class complacency. Then the meteoric growth of the Knights of Labor in 1884 precipitated national hysteria over socialism, a word applying to any attempt to organize the laborer and limit the power of private property. The subsequent Haymarket Square riots of May 1886 merely convinced the nation


Quite clearly, these evangelicals understood that growing cultural pluralism currently undercutting the evangelically dominated national culture arose from varied sources such as a rationalist Biblical criticism in the tradition of Ernst Renan and David F. Strauss, the apparent increase of that homegrown infidelity symbolized by Col. Bob Ingersoll, and various scientific materialisms often rooted in a neo-Darwinian base. Still, immigrants appeared to provide that element of population most susceptible to these errors while at the same time stubbornly retaining their various customs, religions and view which, together, eroded the essential elements of national character.

hat unionism threatened the Republic with violent anarchism, socialism and communism. Although efforts to understand the social sources of discontent ultimately predisposed Methodists toward organized labor, they also became fearfully aware of the new and heavily Catholic immigration.

Now some Methodists like Charles G. Trusdell and Henry K. Carroll swam against the current by defending Roman Catholics as good citizens and acceptable religiously. Carroll, for instance, reminded his skeptical Methodist audience that Catholics were at east Christians, their religion was better than “no religion, or any pagan religion, or than Christless Unitarianism.” Yet theirs was a decidedly minority view. Denying them Christian status, from the 1850’s on, William Nast attacked Catholics as dangerous to self-government and popular sovereignty while he decided by 1884 that the new immigration had to be stopped. Nast would have agreed with the Rev. Bostwick Hawley’s rejection of Catholics in 1879, for owing allegiance “to a foreign power rather than to the Constitution . . . , good citizenship and the best interests of the country.” Hinting as much in 1888, the bishops declared their Church had no intention of imitating the Catholic policy of dominating the political action of its adherents.34

Thus, by 1889, Methodists were coming to agree with people like De Pauw University President Alexander Martin, who feared

34 Trusdell argued that the Declaration of Independence was the “religio-political creed of the American people” because it “acknowledges the universal fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.” Contrary to prevalent opinion, Roman Catholics helped to defend this reality in the Mexican and Civil Wars. Still, they were suspect at times because only “Protestant Christianity” really supported these institutions. “The Religious Factor” MR, LXXI (1889), 679, 679-84. Carroll presented an even more vigorous defense of the integrity, Christian character, and law-abiding nature of the Roman Catholic Church in America—H. K. Carroll, “Our Attitude Toward Roman Catholics,” MR, LXXVII (1895), 231-43; Carl Witke, William Nast, Patriarch of German Methodism (Detroit: Wayne State U. Press, 1959), pp. 96-98, 133; Rev. Bostwick Hawley, “Relations of Politics and Christianity,” MR, LXI (1879), 475; “Address of the Bishops,” MEC Journal, 1888, p. 58.

Allusions to the incompatibility of Roman Catholics with American institutions and citizenship roots in the longterm Papal claim to temporal authority over mankind, in general, and as well as papal rule of approximately one-fifth of Italy until the 1860’s and of Rome until 1870—Protestants were not allowed to worship or proselytize in his realm. That the Pope lost control of the Papal States to the revolutionarily unified Italy did not allay Protestant fears because the Papacy went into Vatican City exile after denouncing the new kingdom of Italy and demanding restoration of the Papal kingdoms. Not until the 1920’s and Mussolini’s pro-Catholic fascist government did the Vatican, by treaty, reconcile itself to the new state of affairs. That Rome strengthened its control over the international church, at the time it was losing political control in Italy, frightened American Methodists and Protestants because of supposed Papal designs on America.
for the American mission because a “powerful and unscrupulous hierarchy, losing ground in the old world, has fastened its eyes and is largely concentrating effort, on this Republic.” Traditional democratic ideology coupled with increased fear for the Republic encouraged Methodists to become so nationalistic that, by 1900, every church, Sunday school and General Conference prominently displayed the U.S. flag, to quote the 1889 Central Illinois Conference, “as an emblem of our Christian civilization.”

Although Methodists like Leroy M. Vernon, John W. Hamilton, William H. Wilder and Victor Walker still hoped in the 1890's that a comprehensive national system of education would protect the Republic by Americanizing the immigrant, the chorus of contemporary invective against the foreigner approached crescendo. D. Murphy warned in 1890 that an immigrant-swelled Roman Catholicism “aims at the overthrow of those bulwarks of our nation—a free school, free speech, free press, a free conscience, and an open Bible.” In 1891, the Rev. William H. Wilder blamed the new immigration for current urban social crises because it consisted of “undesirable material—Italians, Huns, Poles” which gave strength to “infidelity, Romanism and rum.” Professor George M. Steele claimed, “without intelligence, and without enterprise to push out into the country where their services are needed, they form a sediment that is almost every way offensive, and which infects the native population brought into contact with it, until the whole becomes fused into a seething mass of poverty and degradation.” Reacting accordingly, in 1892, the New York, Maine, Genesee, and Kansas Conferences demanded a general immigration law to exclude undesirable immigrants, whether European or Oriental. The bishops concurred. They told the General Conference of 1892 that immigration brought habits and ideas so dangerous to “our cherished principles and institutions” that Americans must reconsider their pledge of “asylum and liberty” for the oppressed. Their solution combined evangelism with laws to screen immigrants and to protect the franchise from “possible prostitution to the base ends of partisan abuses.” Equally fearful, the General Conference endorsed the

activities of the National League for the Protection of American Institutions. With James King as General Secretary and several other Methodists among its founders, the aristocratic League tried to mobilize Protestant America in defense of their Anglo-Saxon Republic. Successive pastor of seven prominent New York City Methodist churches, powerful member of the Evangelical Alliance and staunch Republican, King spent much of the late nineteenth century defending the evangelical base of American culture. As secretary for the League, he conducted propaganda campaigns and political lobbying to further this end. In 1899, King published under League auspices a massive history of the Anglo-Saxon origins, nature and genius of American democracy, a genius threatened by Romanism. As Facing the Twentieth Century suggests, the objects of the League were openly to “secure constitutional and legislative safeguards for the protection of the common-school system and other American institutions, and to promote public instruction in harmony with such institutions, and to prevent all sectarian or denominational appropriations of public funds.” Suffice it to say that King thought it impossible for a Catholic loyal to Rome to be a good American citizen. Representing the League, King demanded that immigrants pass educational and character tests so that incompetents, paupers and criminals might be excluded. Included in those not welcome were persons “who hold political principles antagonistic to society organized for the promotion of constitutional liberty, or who persist in maintaining allegiance to any foreign power or ruler.”

King’s efforts gained the bishops’ support during the General Conference of 1904. According to the bishops, “Mormonism, Romanism, and sundry other isms of evil omen push on their work


37 James M. King, Facing the Twentieth Century (New York: American League Society, 1899), pp. 520, 567, 71, 79-82, 97, 100, 121-32, 176-78, 270. Among the other Methodist members were Civil War General Clinton B. Fisk and Wallstreet stockbroker John D. Slayback.
and gain numerous adherents.” Though Romanism did not employ the infamous methods which it used in Spain and elsewhere, “its efforts to control the secular press, its adroit influence in politics, and its tireless assaults on one of the chief bulwarks of the republic, the public school system, demand the sleepless vigilance of all Protestants and patriots.” Its “malign influence” throughout history provides object lessons to which “we cannot close our eyes because of any mawkish plea for religious toleration. What in Romanism is morally and religiously good we not merely tolerate, but welcome, but what in it is erroneous and evil, subversive of individual rights and national safety, we must evermore expose and combat.” Focusing on the public schools, the Conference in turn declared them the bulwark of the republic, sufficient as an educational foundation for outside Church work, that Bible reading without sectarian comment was useful in the schools. Moreover the Conference decided to petition Congress to so amend the Constitution as to forever prohibit diversion of public funds for sectarian purposes and invited other Protestant bodies to unite in this petition.38

While applauding intensive Methodist evangelism and social gospel activities among the nation’s foreign peoples, the bishops admitted these activities focused “the attention of the Church at large on the frightful moral plague spots in large cities, and on the grave perils of heterogeneous immigration which, in 1903, landed on our shores almost one million persons of alien birth and spirit—many of them paupers, criminals, socialists, or anarchists.” We have carelessly taken for granted that the nation has reached the final form of “government of the people, for the people, by the people to which all nations must come at length.” Since American problems increased with immigration, the bishops concluded, “it is by no means certain that universal suffrage controlled by demagogues may not bring frightful distress to our great cities, and even shake the very pillars of the republic.” Although remaining true to Methodist abolitionist heritage by condemning racism and mob spirit, it was but a small step for the bishops of 1908 to endorse restriction of Oriental immigration while worrying aloud about massive European influx into East Coast cities.39

Ironically, then, the very year when Methodism officially made the most significant and longterm denominational commitment to an evermore liberal social gospel was also the year when the Church withdrew support from a crucial element of nineteenth century American liberalism, an open door to immigrants. This altered stance in part reflects Church acceptance of the labor union claim that immigration endangered the well-being of the common man. Yet more importantly, this ironic juxtaposition of “immigration restriction sentiment” and “social gospel commitment” highlights the Methodist Episcopal goal of conserving and implementing the evangelical and democratic Religion of the Republic.