Social Ethics in the Making
Books by Gary Dorrien

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Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition

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For James Cone
Eminent theologian and treasured friend
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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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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 ethics that transcended the academy. This book pays attention to both meanings, featuring prominent academic voices and important exponents of social Christianity who had little or no relation to the social ethics guild. In the latter category, pastors and movement activists are prominent; on the other hand, after the book enters the postmodern era, the academics prevail almost without exception. In contemporary social ethics, even self-described “public intellectuals” and “public theologians” are academics.

Social Ethics in the Making emphasizes the role of the liberal-Progressive social gospel in giving birth to social ethics and establishing its disciplinary character. It describes the founders of social ethics whom history forgot, the liberal Protestant social gospelers whom history remembered, and the founders of African-American and Roman Catholic traditions of social Christianity. It devotes more attention to
Reinhold Niebuhr than to any other figure, analyzing his influential blend of realist politics and neo-Augustinian theology, while making room for H. Richard Niebuhr’s ethic of the responsible self. It treats liberation theology as a third major tradition alongside the social gospel and Christian realism, interpreting liberationism fundamentally as an eruption of repressed and excluded voices. It examines various offshoots and hybrid blends of these traditions and gives extensive attention to evangelical and neconservative alternatives. It emphasizes contemporary discussions of race, gender, sexuality, ecology, and cultural difference, and analyzes fundamental debates over the coherence and relevance of the social-ethical tradition.

Some of the latter debates have carried on for over a century. Is social Christianity a naturalistic and/or sociopolitical replacement for traditional Christian supernaturalism? Has social ethics addressed the appropriate topics? Was it fatally flawed from the beginning through its connection to social gospel Progressivism? How political or realistic can social ethics be without losing its basis in Christianity? Does social ethics need a specific social scientific method to be a field, or is it better off being the place in a theological curriculum where one directly takes up current social problems?

The founders of social ethics, notably Francis Greenwood Peabody, had no doubt that this new field needed a scientific method. Social ethics was established to expound the ethical dimension of a rising, ostensibly unified field of social science. Beginning as a successor to required courses in moral philosophy, it approached ethics inductively as the study of social movements addressing social problems. Social ethicists used social scientific methods to observe, generalize, and correlate their way to an account of the whole, including its ethical character. By attaching themselves to social science, the social-ethical founders won a place for their enterprise in theological education, and aspired to one in social science.

But the social sciences took the path of specialization and secularization, leaving social ethics to theology. Afterwards, the view that social ethics had to have a blood relationship to science became a minority one, while the field’s greatest figures paid little attention to disciplinary concerns. What mattered to the great advocates of social Christianity was to change the world, not the university. The three towering figures in American Christian social ethics are Walter Rauschenbusch, the prophet of the social gospel; Reinhold Niebuhr, the theorist of Christian realism; and Martin Luther King, Jr, the leader of modern America’s greatest liberation movement. But Rauschenbusch and King did not teach social ethics, and Niebuhr took little interest in disciplinary or methodological issues.

Niebuhr did not worry about the disciplinary standing of his field, nor did he share Peabody’s fixation with social scientific validation. He ended up in social ethics because that was the place where liberal seminaries took up current social problems. That was what he cared about: the struggle for justice and a decent world order. To the extent that Niebuhr had a method, it was a dispositional one of determining the meaning of justice in the interaction of Christian love and concrete situation. For Niebuhr, justice was a contextual application of the law of love to the sociopolitical sphere, mediated by the principles of freedom, equality, and order.

A great deal of social ethics has been Niebuhrian in the sense of being essentially political, activist, and pragmatic. That did not start with Niebuhr, because in this respect he simply assumed the activist orientation of the social gospel movement that preceded him. Rauschenbusch had no field or doctorate; he taught in the German Department at Colgate Rochester Seminary and ended up, by accident, in church
history. Niebuhr had no field or doctorate either, except for the social-ethical space that he inherited from the social gospel. Thus the major social ethicists have not been the ones that worried about the social scientific or methodological standing of their field.

But social ethics has not lacked method-minded caretakers of the discipline that Peabody, William Jewett Tucker, and Graham Taylor founded. In the second generation of the social gospel, Harry F. Ward and John A. Ryan were notable practitioners of a distinct method. Ward used a stripped down variant of Peabody’s method, while Ryan fashioned a Roman Catholic version of the social gospel that blended policy arguments with Thomist philosophy. In the next generation field consciousness heightened, notably in the work of John C. Bennett, Walter G. Muelder, and James Luther Adams. Bennett developed the theory of “middle axioms” that Niebuhr partly adopted; Muelder developed a “synoptic” method that fit his personalist theory of the social mind as the total content of objective spirit; Adams developed an influential curriculum model at the University of Chicago Divinity School. At Chicago, a school with a tradition of naturalistic empiricism, students were trained to search for moral norms within the variegated life of society, integrating social scientific research with ethical reasoning. In recent social ethics, Gibson Winter and James Gustafson have been the leading advocates of binding ethics to social science. This book examines these figures and perspectives, in addition to social ethics as liberationist, womanist, mujerista, and feminist praxis, and to social ethics as communitarian narrative, biblical application, confessional discipline, ecumenical consensus, and postmodern carnival.

It would be enough to write a strictly disciplinary history of American social ethics. It would be enough, and more interesting, to write a book on social-ethical thinkers who made a public impact. A third possibility would focus on the social ethics of the Christian denominations and ecumenical movement. This book combines the first and second projects while telling an ample slice of the third story through its interpretation of ecumenical theologians such as Ward, Bennett, Muelder, both Niebuhrs, John Courtney Murray, John Howard Yoder, Max Stackhouse, and Larry Rasmussen. By giving equal weight to the disciplinary and public stories, I show that social ethics at its best has been a public discourse of the academy and church.

In addition to the field’s usual cast of luminaries, this book tells the unknown story of the founders of social ethics, restores Harry Ward to his rightful place in social Christian history, and gives featured attention to streams of the social gospel that were not white-male-Protestant. Reverdy Ransom was a major black social gospeler of his time and a forerunner of the civil rights movement. A theological liberal, he was also a Socialist, a black nationalist, and in his later career, a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He was a liberationist and Afrocentrist before these terms had currency. His rhetorical eloquence, for which he was renowned in his time, was stunning. Afterwards he was almost completely forgotten; the present work makes an argument for remembrance. Jane Addams, by contrast, was famous in her time and became more so afterwards, but she is rarely counted as a Christian social ethicist, a convention I argue against.

The Catholic figures discussed in the first half of this book had different kinds of careers from their Protestant counterparts. Catholic officials and intellectuals took a cautious attitude toward America’s predominantly Protestant society, and they had to cope with the papal condemnations of modernism. Catholic institutions were also slow to recognize social ethics as a discipline. While all of that changed after Vatican II
another significant difference remained: for most liberal Protestants, denominational identity was not very important, but for Catholics, the church and its tradition were centrally important. All three of the pre-Vatican II Catholics featured in this book – John A. Ryan, John Courtney Murray, and Dorothy Day – were theologically conservative, but each of them took edgy social-ethical positions that risked ecclesiastical censure. Ryan vigorously supported the New Deal, Murray defended religious freedom, and Day was a pacifist movement leader. Murray’s stance led to ecclesiastical censure; at Vatican II he was vindicated.

After Vatican II, Catholic social-ethical thought was very much like liberal Protestant ethics in its diversity of perspectives and engagement with liberation theology. Mary Daly began her career as a Catholic theologian before opting for radical feminism. Michael Novak took a brief turn as a Catholic New Leftist before opting for Catholic neoconservatism. Charles Curran’s influential arguments against Catholic teaching on sexual ethics led to his censure by the Vatican. David Hollenbach formulated a prominent Catholic position on human rights, defending economic rights in opposition to Novak. Dennis P. McCann was closer to Novak, criticizing typical social-ethical progressivism on political economics. Lisa Sowle Cahill espoused a liberal feminist perspective on sexual ethics. Daniel C. Maguire proposed an ethical “common creed” with a strongly liberationist bent. Ada María Isasi-Díaz and María Pilar Aquino advocated mujerista and Latina feminist perspectives, respectively, that reflected the influence of Latin American liberation theology. All of these perspectives were forged in dialogue with or as types of liberation theology, though negatively in Novak’s case.

The influence of liberation theology as a third major tradition of social ethics shows through in most of the book’s second half. Chapter 6 discusses liberationist founders Martin Luther King, Jr, James H. Cone, Mary Daly, and Beverly W. Harrison, describing Cone’s founding of black liberation theology, Daly’s origination of radical feminist theology, and Harrison’s leading role in establishing feminist social ethics and queer theory.

Chapter 7 deals with evangelical and neoconservative perspectives, featuring Carl F. H. Henry, John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, Michael Novak, and Jim Wallis. Henry, the major theologian of conservative evangelicalism, achieved godfather status in the Christian Right movement. Yoder championed the pacifism and Anabaptist evangelicalism of the radical Reformation. Hauerwas found a sizable audience as an evangelical Methodist proponent of a Yoder-style communal ethic. Novak’s “teology of the corporation” wedded corporate capitalist apologetics to conservative Catholic ethics. Wallis achieved public prominence as the spokesperson for a neglected alternative, progressive evangelicalism. Yoder, Hauerwas and Wallis had little in common with the Christian Right and even less with neoconservatives, but all the thinkers featured in Chapter 7 had fundamental objections to the social-ethical tradition. For them, social ethics had begun badly by baptizing liberal modernism; afterward it made faulty course corrections; repeatedly, it was about the wrong things.

Chapters 8 and 9 describe the legacies of liberation theology and the concerns of late twentieth and early twenty-first century social ethicists to make sense of postmodernity, cultural difference, sexuality, and ecology. Except for James Gustafson, all the ethicists featured in Chapter 8 either adopted or interrogated key aspects of liberationist criticism, as did every ethicist featured in Chapter 9.
Chapter 8 mixes disciplinary, ecclesiological, and public concerns, analyzing Charles Curran’s moderate liberalism, Gibson Winter’s argument for social ethics as social scientific praxis, James Gustafson’s theocentric ethics, Cornel West’s publicly prominent social criticism, Katie G. Cannon’s exposition of womanist ethics, and Victor Anderson’s postmodern cultural criticism. With a focus on work contemporary with the writing of the book, Chapter 9 describes the state of the field in the early 2000s with reference to economy, sexuality, ecology, and difference, featuring Max Stackhouse and Dennis McCann on political economy; Stackhouse, Lisa Sowle Cahill, and Marvin M. Ellison on sexual ethics; John B. Cobb, Jr. and Larry Rasmussen on ecological ethics; Daniel Maguire’s proposal for a common Christian ethical creed; Sharon Welch’s feminist ethic of risk and solidarity; Emilie M. Towner’s elaboration of womanist ethics; the Latina feminist perspectives of Ada María Isasi-Díaz and María Pilar Aquino; and David Hollenbach’s defense of human rights. My concluding chapter makes an argument for the relevance of the social gospel vision of economic democracy, the limits and value of progressive realism, and the importance of liberationist and ecological criticism.

Even a large book devoted solely to contemporary social ethics would face very difficult problems of selection and emphasis. This book, dealing with the current scene only in its later chapters, can address only a fraction of the field’s current debates. The book as a whole gives highest priority to racial justice, economic justice, war, and representing the field’s diversity of perspectives, traditions, and theorists. The priority given to the ethics of war and violence drops back somewhat in the last two chapters to make room for ecological ethics and debates about gay and lesbian sexuality. Arguments about militarism and war are as important today as ever before; a substantial portion of my own work is devoted to this subject. But most of the arguments in this area are not new; ours is the generation to feature the ethics of difference.

This book makes a pitch, however, for the enduring relevance of the most “discredited” social gospel idea of all, economic democracy. Ernst Troeltsch, in his classic history of Christian social thought The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches (1912), observed that up to the late nineteenth century, Christianity had developed only two major social philosophies: medieval Catholicism and Calvinist Protestantism. The modern social gospel – specifically, Christian socialism – was significant for having developed the third one, he argued. Its goal was to make Christianity relevant to a nationalistic, capitalist, technological, and increasingly secular order, an ambitious project that Aquinas and Calvin could not have imagined. Troeltsch cautioned that the social problem was “vast and complicated,” and that modern defenders of the traditional models offered little help in alleviating “all this distress which weighs on our hearts and minds like a perpetual menace.” To move forward, Christianity had to build on the achievements of the Christian Socialists, who regained for the church the “Utopian and revolutionary character” of Christianity in modern form.¹

A century later that is still what Christianity needs to do.

Note

Chapter 1

Inventing Social Ethics

Francis Greenwood Peabody, William Jewett Tucker, and Graham Taylor

The social gospelers who founded social ethics were not the ones whom history remembered. The social gospelers history remembered were bracing personalities with a missionary spirit who reached the general public: Washington Gladden, Richard Ely, Josiah Strong, George Herron, and Walter Rauschenbusch. Another renowned social gospeler, Shailer Mathews, was a half-exception by virtue of playing several roles simultaneously, but he operated primarily in the public square. All the renowned social gospelers came to be renowned by preaching the social gospel as a form of public homiletics.

The founders of social ethics also spoke to the general public, but as social ethicists they were absorbed by a cause that belonged to the academy: making a home for Christian ethics as a self-standing discipline of ethically grounded social science. They urged that society is a whole that includes an ethical dimension; thus, there needed to be something like social ethics. This discipline would be a central feature of liberal arts and seminary education. It would succeed the old moral philosophy, replacing an outmoded Scottish commonsense realism with a socially oriented idealism.

Intellectually the founders of social ethics belonged to the American generation that reconciled Christianity to Darwinism, accepted the historical critical approach to the Bible, and discovered the power of social ideas. As first generation social gospelers they believed that modern scholarship had rediscovered the social meaning of Christianity in the kingdom-centered faith of the historical Jesus. As early advocates of sociology, they also believed in the disciplinary unity of social science and its ethical character.

Francis Greenwood Peabody, a longtime professor at Harvard University, was the first to teach social ethics as an academic discipline, in 1880. William Jewett Tucker, an Andover Seminary professor who later achieved distinction as president of Dartmouth College, taught courses in the 1880s on “social economics.” Graham Taylor, an indefatigable social activist and colleague of Jane Addams, chaired the first department of Christian Sociology, at Chicago Theological Seminary (CTS). These pioneers of social-ethical analysis were publicly prominent in their time, and did not belong wholly to the academy. But because they fought primarily in the academy, with limited success, they were not remembered as major social gospelers.

Peabody, Tucker, and Taylor proposed to study social conditions with a Christian ethical view toward what might be done about them. They shared Ely’s concern that the emerging discipline of sociology needed to be informed by the ethical conscience
of progressive religion. They updated the liberal third way between authoritarian orthodoxy and secular disbelief. They resisted an ascending social Darwinism in the social sciences and an ascending radicalism in the Socialist and labor movements. They were advocates of liberal reform, good government, cooperation, the common good, and the social gospel Jesus. Believing that social science had a great future in the academy and modern society, they did not want it to be lost to Christianity, or Christianity to it. Earnestly they sought to show that Christianity was descriptively and normatively relevant to modern society.

The founders of social ethics, to their regret, lived to witness the fragmentation of social science, the academic denial of its ethical character, and the marginalization of their intellectual enterprise. Having started something new, they lost the battle for social ethics as a university discipline, but won a place for it in theological education, establishing a theological discipline that outlived much of its social gospel basis. Social ethics survived, albeit on the fringe of the academy, because it was rooted in the nineteenth-century discovery that there is such a thing as social structure and that redemption always has a social dimension.

Becoming Francis Greenwood Peabody

Most of the early social gospelers came from evangelical backgrounds, but the first social ethicist, Francis Greenwood Peabody, was born into liberal Christianity as the son of a prominent Unitarian pastor, Ephraim Peabody, and a privileged Unitarian mother, Mary Ellen Derby. Ephraim Peabody spent his early pastoral career as a Unitarian missionary to the western United States (Cincinnati) and his later career as minister of King’s Chapel in Boston. Highly regarded as a spiritual leader, he preached often on character development and personality, and was known for his dedication to the poor, organizing poor-relief projects. In 1856, when his son Francis was 9 years old, Ephraim Peabody died of tuberculosis; Francis later recalled that he was “nearly seven” at the time. Elsewhere he recalled, with stronger reliability, that his parents had contrasting but complementary personalities. His father was imbued with a radiant holiness and unworldly simplicity that made him a beloved pastor, while his mother, the granddaughter of America’s first millionaire (Salem merchant Elias Hasket Derby), was a cultivated, worldly, impressive woman of confident charm. Peabody viewed his parents’ happy marriage as a symbol of the two traditions of New England coming together: “the idealism of the hills and the commercialism of the cities.”

As a widow, Mary Ellen Peabody resolved to raise her four children in the spiritual seriousness of their departed father. “All was for his sake; each decision of school or play was as he would have desired,” Peabody later recalled. The ebullient, “luxury-loving” mother became a disciplinarian, dispensing religion with a more rigorous hand than Peabody recalled as being in the nature of his father’s gentle spirit. For many years the family did not celebrate Thanksgiving because Ephraim Peabody had died on Thanksgiving. Thrown into economic hardship by his death, the family continued to live in Boston’s wealthy Beacon Hill, where, Peabody claimed, he felt no envy of privileged neighbors. Gradually he forgot his father’s appearance and maxims, but another kind of paternal memory was instilled in him, one that stayed in his psyche and worldview.
Peabody wrote affectionate recollections of his parents for the rest of his life, in addition to character portraits of the many friends and relatives who made up New England’s close-knit circle of Unitarian leaders. His father’s former congregation paid for his education, which Peabody took at Harvard College and Harvard Divinity School, graduating respectively in 1869 and 1872. In his telling, his schooling was unremittingly desultory. As a youth it had seemed to him that Harvard professors were remarkably insular and uninteresting. Huddled in a small, secluded world of texts and each other’s company, they seemed to prize their detachment from the real world of politics, commerce, and Boston as though it were a virtue. Sadly, they did not improve after Peabody enrolled at the college. He allowed that Harvard professors were distinguished intellectually, dwelling high above others, where “the air was pure”; philosopher Francis Bowen, an able proponent of Scottish commonsense moralism, taught there, as did botanist Asa Gray, mathematician Benjamin Peirce, and rhetoric scholar Francis J. Child, all respected scholars with much to offer. But in Peabody’s experience of them, Harvard professors took little interest in anything besides themselves and their subjects. They bored their students with deadly recitations and barely acknowledged that a school must have students. Peabody compared them to a monastic order.

The Divinity School proved to be equally depressing. Peabody called his three years of divinity training “a disheartening experience of uninspiring study and retarded thought.” In theory Harvard Divinity School was nondenominational, not Unitarian, but in reality, a fuddy-duddy brand of Unitarian orthodoxy prevailed. Formally the school contended that it sought the truth, rather than declaring it, in matters of divinity; in reality it remained so deeply attached to the embattled Unitarian orthodoxy of the National Conference of Unitarian Churches that university officials periodically debated a divorce from the Divinity School. During Peabody’s years there historical criticism was practiced sparingly, philosophical idealism was spurned, classroom lectures seemed purposely dull, and theology and ethics were taught, in his phrase, as “subjects of ecclesiastical erudition and doctrinal desiccation.” Reaching for the strongest way of conveying a bad memory, Peabody declared: “The fresh breeze of modern thought rarely penetrated the lecture-rooms . . . I cannot remember attaining in seven years of Harvard classrooms anything that could be fairly described as an idea.”

That was slightly hyperbolic. Harvard Divinity School declined steeply from 1840 to 1880, averaging four faculty members and 20 students. It reached its nadir in the year 1868–9, when dean Oliver Stearns was its only full-time, able-bodied professor in residence. But the school was always liberal by virtue of being Unitarian; in the 1850s, despite being neglected by the university, it had three able teachers (Convers Francis, George Rapall Noyes, and Frederic Henry Hedge) and one bad one (George E. Ellis). Moreover, the Divinity School’s upward turn began in 1869, just as Peabody arrived, when Harvard’s new president, Charles William Eliot, declared that a revamped Divinity School had a vital role to play in creating a model research university at Harvard. Three new faculty appointments were made: Charles Carroll Everett, the first Bussey Professor of Theology, who became a distinguished dean at the Divinity School; Ezra Abbott, the first Bussey Professor of New Testament Criticism and Interpretation, who achieved scholarly distinction; and Edward James Young, Hancock Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament, who flopped as a scholar and teacher and was forced to resign in 1880, ostensibly to make room for a non-Unitarian.

These teachers schooled Peabody in German names, labels, and oracles. Despite his complaints that he heard no modern thoughts, Peabody also complained that his
teachers idolized German scholars, settling disputed points with a word from a German authority. This species of reverence drove him straight to Germany. He later explained, “It seemed essential to peace of mind that one should determine whether the gods of German theology were infallible, or whether they might sometimes nod.” Peabody owed his German education to his Harvard teachers, and his subsequent career would not have been possible without the changes that occurred at Harvard during his student days.6

In Germany he journeyed first to Heidelberg, which he didn’t like for its arid rationalism, then to Leipzig, which was worse for its backward-looking orthodoxy. He found a brief reward in Halle, where, like many American students before him, notably Charles Briggs and Egbert Smyth, he luxuriated in the lectures and friendship of Friedrich August Tholuck. A legendary pietist scholar and theologian, equally renowned for his kindly manner, Tholuck welcomed Americans into his classroom and home. As a theologian he stressed religious experience in the fashion of Friedrich Schleiermacher while avoiding the radical aspects of Schleiermacher’s thought. Tholuck taught that evangelical faith and historical criticism were natural allies because good scholarship construed biblical meaning within the circle of faith: “It must be remembered that the scientific apprehension of religious doctrines presupposes a religious experience. Without this moral qualification, it is impossible to obtain a true insight into theological dogmas.”7

Peabody heard Tholuck lecture on historical and modern theology, and Tholuck offered to meet with him privately to study Schleiermacher’s Discourses on Religion. But upon descending the stairway in his home to greet Peabody for their first session, Tholuck either stumbled or had a seizure, falling down the stairs. His health deteriorated rapidly afterwards. Though Tholuck lectured for seven more years until his death in 1877, Peabody and his wife Cora Weld were the last Americans to experience the Tholuck effect. For Peabody, Tholuck was the ideal: a rigorous scholar with a devout Christian spirit. Years later Peabody put it stronger, recalling that Tholuck showed him “that the career of a scholar might be consistent with the character of a saint.” In Tholuck’s classroom Peabody began his long association with German thought and his career as an American interpreter of German theology.8

His first idea came to him in a German bookshop in 1872. Perusing Otto Pfeiderer’s book Die Religion, ihr Wesen und ihre Geschichte (1869) (Religion, Its Nature and Its History) it occurred to Peabody that he might spend his life doing the sort of thing that Pfeiderer did: validating a religious philosophy by its history. Instead of beginning with an a priori doctrine or tradition, one might derive a religious outlook from an inductive study of human nature and ethical activity. Peabody reasoned that if he studied religion inductively, through its historical development, he should be able to defend it in a way that rescued religion from provincialism.9

That was the seed of social ethics – at least, in his case. Peabody expected to write about such things as a pastor. After a brief stint as a chaplain at Antioch College in Ohio he came home to Boston as minister of the First Parish (Unitarian) in Cambridge. Peabody gave six years to parish ministry, although in practice, as he admitted, it was more like three. He aspired to a long career at Cambridge’s flagship Unitarian parish, but was ill most of the time. Nineteenth-century New Englanders believed that long, arduous trips to California and Europe were the best remedy for chronic illnesses, so Peabody took two of them. His father had died of tuberculosis at the age of 49; many of Peabody’s devoted parishioners feared that he was destined to a similar fate. In 1880,
after returning from a second prolonged absence still in poor health, he resigned himself to a lower, less important, less taxing vocation: lecturer at Harvard Divinity School. To Peabody, giving up the ministry for the work of a seminary instructor seemed “a calamity.” He consoled himself that perhaps he could teach seminarians “the lessons of my own defeat.” Instead he found an unexpected calling at the take-off of the social gospel, the American liberal theology movement, and Harvard’s drive to become a modern research university.10

Philosophies of Moral Philosophy

The social gospel happened for a confluence of reasons that impacted on each other. It was fed by the wellsprings of eighteenth-century Enlightenment humanitarianism and the postmillennialist passion for social redemption that fueled the evangelical antislavery movements. It took root as a response to the corruption and oppressive conditions of the Gilded Age, goaded by writers such as Edward Bellamy, Stephen Colwell, Richard Ely, and Henry Demarest Lloyd. It took inspiration from the existence of a Christian Socialist movement in England, and rode on the back of a rising sociological consciousness and literature.11

Above all, the social gospel was a response to a burgeoning labor movement. Union leaders blasted the churches for doing nothing for poor and working-class people. Liberal Christian leaders realized it was pointless to defend Christianity if the churches were indefensible on this issue. Defending Christianity and improving its social conscience went together.

Thus the first attempts by seminaries to link Christian ethics with social problems usually folded the enterprise into apologetics. Christianity had to be defended against the new challenges to Christian belief. In 1851 the earliest forerunner of the social gospel, Stephen Colwell, admonished Protestant ministers not to deride the stirrings of the poor for social justice. A Philadelphia manufacturer and trustee of Princeton Theological Seminary, Colwell had a prescient social conscience. His book New Themes for the Protestant Clergy (1851) urged that it was natural and a good thing for the working class to revolt against a predatory economic system. Colwell wanted American Protestantism to be known for speaking to the working class “in tones of kindness and encouragement.” Instead of defending “selfishness to its highest limits” in the economic order Protestant ministers should demand an economy consistent with the teachings of Jesus: “This idea of considering men as mere machines for the purpose of creating and distributing wealth, may do well to round off the periods, syllogisms, and statements of political economists; but the whole notion is totally and irreconcilably at variance with Christianity.”12

Colwell was an advocate of sharing and community, not socialism, but he credited Socialists for championing social justice: “We look upon the whole socialist movement as one of the greatest events of this age.” He shook his head at ministers who attacked socialism as an enemy of Christianity, imploring them to stop embarrassing Christianity with such nonsense. Besides making a show of their ignorance, he admonished, the clergy betrayed “a stubborn and wicked conservatism which is rooted to one spot in this world of evil.”13

Colwell was a lonely voice in Protestant polite society of the 1850s and 1860s, but in 1871 he became the principal founder of a chair in Christian ethics at Princeton
Inventing Social Ethics

Theological Seminary, the first of its kind in the United States. Eventually named the Stephen Colwell Chair of Christian Ethics, it was originally called the chair of Christian Ethics and Apologetics. The seminary announced that its purpose was to explore “Christian ethics, theoretically, historically, and in living connection with various branches of the social sciences.” That was an early definition of social ethics, although the chair’s first occupant, Charles A. Aiken, emphasized apologetics and philosophical ethics, not the social sciences. He took a brief and apologetic pass at labor, assured that Christianity gave labor a new dignity, and stressed the history of philosophical ethics. Aiken’s model was the old moral philosophy, not social ethics. 14

The founders of social ethics conceived their invention as the successor to a fading, venerable, still-important moral philosophy. Nearly every American college put moral philosophy at the center of its required curriculum, usually as a capstone course taught by a clergyman college president. In most colleges theology was esteemed and daily chapel was compulsory. The unifying center of the curriculum, however, was a vaguely religious course in moral philosophy consisting of four parts. The first part expounded the method of a favored philosophy; the second part offered an account of human nature and its drives; the third part developed a general ethical system; and the fourth part applied moral principles to institutional and social concerns. Moral philosophy was a remarkably uniform enterprise in American schools because one school of philosophy dominated American education: Scottish commonsense realism. 15

Until the late seventeenth century, the right philosophy in Western higher education was Aristotelianism. Harvard, founded in 1636, was colonial America’s only school of higher education in the seventeenth century. It taught the classical trivium of grammar, rhetoric, and logic and the quadrivium of arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy. Critics protested that a Puritan college should put Calvinist theology at the center of its curriculum, but Harvard conducted classes in Latin, featured Aristotle in physics and metaphysics, and stuck with the pagan texts and forms of the Great Tradition. In the manner of medieval universities, Harvard surrounded and supplemented its classical curriculum with Christian texts (especially Puritan theologian William Ames’ Medulla Theologica), a few recent authors, and a strongly Christian environment. School officials stressed that Puritan thought was fully compatible with natural science, which was called “natural philosophy.” Reformed theology taught that creation could be known through reason; thus, Harvard’s Puritan heritage had nothing to fear from the scientific study of creation. 16

By the end of the seventeenth century, however, a more modern idea of natural philosophy had pushed Aristotle aside. Aristotle taught that objects acquire impetus or gravity, and virtue is an acquired skill that one develops through practice. The former notion, to Christian interpreters, left the universe open to supernatural agency, while Aristotle’s open-ended concept of the moral life was amenable to Christian appropriation. Modern science, to the contrary, epitomized in Isaac Newton’s physics, taught that the universe is a closed system with universal physical laws. Newton (1642–1727) discovered the generalized binomial theorem, the law of gravitation, and the principle of the composition of light, and invented calculus (though he did not publish until after Leibniz, decades later). Newton’s masterwork, Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica (1687), modeled on Euclidean geometry, demonstrated its propositions mathematically from definitions and mathematical axioms. He taught that the world consists of material bodies that interact according to three laws of motion concerning the uniformity of motion, change of motion, and mutuality of action. Newton
described the ultimate conditions of his system—absolute time, space, place, and motion—as independent quantities constituting an absolute framework for measure. His belief in God rested chiefly on his admiration for the mathematical order of creation. The *Principia* was hailed immediately as a revolutionary leap forward in understanding, making Newton famous. In the late seventeenth century “the new natural philosophy,” as it was called at Harvard, was Newton’s picture of nature as a universal system of mathematical order.\(^7\)

Harvard president Increase Mather, fighting off a liberal surge, commended Newtonian students in a commencement address for savoring “a liberal mode of philosophizing.” Since Aristotle was wrong about creation, resurrection, and the immortality of the soul, Mather allowed, it was not a bad thing to put Aristotle in his place. But the ideal was the true liberal one of seeking the truth through the old and new ways: “You who are wont to philosophize in a liberal spirit, are pledged to no particular master, yet I would have you hold fast to that one truly golden saying of Aristotle: *Find a friend in Plato, a friend in Socrates* (and I would say a friend in Aristotle), *but above all find a friend in Truth.*” That diplomatic maneuvering was not enough to prevent Mather’s factional rivals from replacing him as Harvard’s president in 1701, the same year that Connecticut Congregational clergy founded Yale. Connecticut pastors charged that Harvard was obviously backsliding from Puritan orthodoxy. In 1711, Harvard president John Leverett confirmed that Harvard had moved away from Aristotle, if not orthodoxy: “In philosophical matters, Harvardians philosophize in a sane and liberal manner, according to the manner of the century.” Natural philosophy was the system in which true explanations about natural things were provided, he explained: “Without any manner of doubt whatever, all humane matters must be tested by Philosophy. But the same license is not permissible to Theologians.”\(^8\)

At Harvard, Newtonian physics defined “the manner of the century” in natural philosophy, while the works of Newton’s friend and Royal Society colleague John Locke (1632–1704) acquired canonical status in epistemology, political philosophy, moral philosophy, and method. In Book 1 of his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1689), Locke argued that the mind has no innate ideas. In Book 2 he argued that all ideas are products of sensory experience or reflection on experience. In Book 3 he discussed how language gets in the way of the attempt to lay hold of reality. In Book 4 he described the empirical method of analyzing and making judgments about evidence. Locke argued that the mind works on its ideas of sensation and reflection through the operations of combination, division, generalization, and abstraction. On ideas he was an empiricist, seeming to argue that ideas are mental objects, though he inspired rival schools of interpretation on this point. On knowledge he was a rationalist, arguing that knowledge is a product of reason working out the connections between ideas, not something produced directly by our senses. On substance he seemed to believe that things possess a substratum that support their properties, though interpretations varied here as well. On matters religious he was a Puritan Enlightenment defender of the reasonableness of Christianity and the divine commands of God. Locke distinguished between belief and knowledge, arguing that something can be rationally believed as true, but not rightly counted as knowledge, if it is established without direct observation or reasoned deduction. A bare authority claim is never an adequate basis for knowledge, but revelation has its place in theology if it does not contradict reason. God’s existence is knowable because it is a condition of human existence, but matters of revelation can be rational beliefs at most, not knowledge.\(^9\)