

Taking a Cue from the Social Gospel's Critique of Individualism

I've been reading lately about the Progressive Era in the United States and, in particular, the Social Gospel movement, which is seen as an early expression of what is known today as Progressive Christianity. Progressive Christians today, as in the Social Gospel movement, take their bearings from the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

A century and more ago, progressive Christians who identified with the Social Gospel were asking themselves, with respect to various life circumstances, What would Jesus do? They were trying to live in faithfulness to the pattern of life that they believed God intended for them, as exemplified in Jesus. Being a faithful Christian was not so much a matter of believing a set of doctrines or adhering to an ancient creed as it was in being a disciple or follower of the man from Galilee.

In my reading I've been struck by the Social Gospel leaders' frequent identification of individualism as one of the chief obstacles to a socially responsible Christianity. The best of the Social Gospel leaders were also highly critical of the excesses of late 19th and early 20th century capitalism, marked as it was by the greed of the robber barons, enormous disparities of wealth, grievous social and economic conditions for the poor, immigrants, and working classes, and much more.

But individualism seems to have stood out as the human trait that most seriously impaired the human condition, and had resulted in the plethora of social problems with which Americans were sorely afflicted. I remember once preaching a sermon critical of individualism, to which a member of my congregation raised some objection. I'm not sure I helped clarify the matter then, but I suspect the objection arose from a confusion of individualism with individuality.

Christianity has traditionally, and I think rightly, tended to place a high value on the individual. Each and every one of us is a unique and precious individual, to be esteemed and loved without prejudice. Theologically speaking, each is a child of God. For this very reason, Christians should celebrate diversity, not uniformity or conformity. Individuality and diversity belong together, as two sides of the same coin. It is our individuality that makes us diverse, and without diversity we lose individuality. Everyone should be valued and cherished for who they are.

So what's wrong with individualism? Individualism is the assertion of the interests of the self irrespective of the interests of others, including the interests of the whole. It is the tendency to make one's own self not equal but supreme. It is the disregard, or at least discounting, of the common good.

This over-assertion of the self can be expressed by one individual against another, but it can also be magnified and made malignant by joining together of "like-minded" individuals who are bent on asserting themselves over against those who are different from them – in thinking, class, color or race, language, nationality, sexual orientation, religion, and so on. In other words, individualism finds affirmation and magnification in group forms that often become systemic and chronic afflictions to the larger and more diverse society.

Little is said these days about the infection called individualism, which runs rampant in our society. Antagonistic to individuality and diversity, it seeks to suppress and put down those who are “not us.” I fear it is a legacy of what my baby boomer generation called “doing your own thing” – what was sometimes a celebration of individuality, but more often expressed a self-indulgence indifferent to the reality that our lives are all inter-connected and our neighbor’s good is most likely also our own.

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