

THIS IS A DRAFT AND NOT FOR PUBLICATION. (9/15/24)

Ernest Milmore Stires and Social Gospel

A presentation at Saint Thomas Church, Fifth Avenue.

April 7, 2024

Francis X. Blouin Jr.

SLIDE 1 INTRO

In preparation for the exhibition: “The arts in the service of Faith” my distinguished collaborator Inge Reist and I spent a good deal of time focusing on the use of the varied artistic forms which at the highest level support the commitment of our parish to the worship of God. That is an important dimension of our service to faith.

But, as we contemplated this idea of service and as we explored the archives of the parish, we found that service, particularly in the early part of the 20th century, meant a good deal more than this commitment to artistic excellence.

New York City at the turn of the last century was the financial capital of the world. It was also among the most important and largest centers of manufacturing in the nation. It was an industrial metropolis as Bill Franklin pointed out.

The five boroughs had consolidated in 1898. The total population of this consolidated city was 3.4 million in 1900, leaping to 5.6 million in 1920

The growth of railroads in the USA opened the possibility of National Markets for industrial goods. The corporations meeting these demands along with the railroads themselves needed enormous capital funding. New York city was the center of finance to meet these demands. As a result, there was enormous wealth generated in the city, and many who shared in this bounty were members

of this parish and contributed to the construction of this extraordinary church building.

However, I think we forget that at one time on this island (and to a lesser extent in all five boroughs) whole sections were devoted to the manufacturing of goods for local consumption and for shipment across the nation and even the world.

SLIDE 2. NYC MAP

In thinking about this talk, I came across this map at the New York Public Library dated 1922. This map shows that by 1920, there were more than 30,000 factories in NYC with 22,000 located in Manhattan nearly all below 59th street.

As a result, the city, particularly this island, had a very diverse population some benefiting from the enormous wealth generated by this industrial and financial transformation, but most-(by 1920 there were over 800,000). working at low wages to sustain primarily the factories producing goods in enormous quantities.

Many of these workers and their families fell into the category: “the Industrious poor’

AND increasingly, this population was a concern of a broad section of the well-to-do and middle classes of the city, particularly those with a strong religious commitment. Out of this concern came what was known then as the **Social Gospel Movement**.

SLIDE 3. Social Gospel

THIS essentially meant reading the scriptures less with an emphasis on personal salvation and more with an eye to message of the gospel to serve those in need. “as long as you do this to the least of my brethren you do this for me”. It was a call to action.

Walter Raschenbusch wrote in 1907 an enormously influential book that challenged active Christians to think along these lines.

SLIDE 4. The Third Saint Thomas Church

Within this patch work of a complicated urban industrial Economy was Saint Thomas Church. It's grand edifice built in 1870, designed by Richard Upjohn was a neighborhood landmark in an area populated by names such as Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, When that third church of the parish burned down in 1905, a headline referred to the church as a center of the social world in the city.

The rector at the time was Ernest Millmore Stires. Stires was born in [Norfolk, Virginia](#) in 1866, Graduated from the University of Virginia 1888 and after study at the Virginia Theological Seminary, he was ordained in the Episcopal Church in 1892. After service to parishes in Augusta Georgia and Chicago Illinois, he was called to be rector of Saint Thomas in 1901.

St Thomas then was a well to do parish situated in the gilded age splendor of fifth avenue mansions. The challenge for Fr. Stires was to define a mission for the parish as it was situated within the larger context of the massive social and economic dislocations of a growing urban and industrial economy How would he address this issue? Would the parish be an isolated island of privilege or would it look beyond its immediate surroundings with a broader mission? That was a central question for him when he arrived as rector on November 1 1901.

SLIDE 5. YEARBOOK 1901

In the 1901 yearbook of the parish he issued a statement proposing a particular mission for St Thomas. This statement has been quoted in relatively recent parish history by Canon Wright. Inge Reist mentioned it in the previous lecture, And we used it in our exhibit downstairs. However in general it is not well known. I

personally as a historian find it one of the most profound statements of Christian commitment I have ever read.

Today I want to do three things. First I want to talk about this statement. Second I want to talk about how the parish acted on this statement and Third I want to talk about why in subsequent decades it was so hard to realize Fr Stires simple formula.

SLIDE 6 AND 7. THE STATEMENT

The mission of St. Thomas's is to the well-to-do for their own sake, and for the sake of those who are not well-to-do. Things are unequally distributed in this world...many suffer here from having too little and many from having too much. One clear class is unable to get the relief it needs, and the other has not learned to give the relief in its power. All must suffer until the relief is given. The mission of St. Thomas's is to help us to save ourselves by saving others; to regard all our successes, our influence, our money, as worth nothing in themselves, but worth much when devoted to elevating humanity. The pursuit of wealth for selfish ends is morally criminal; to make money for the purpose of making men is to do our duty to God, to our fellows, and to ourselves.... our hearts and hands must be quick to aid the suffering anywhere, to help God's cause everywhere.... The mission work of the Church in this land must be more liberally sustained than ever before, for the needs and opportunities were never so great....

Comments on Stires statement

It is an extraordinary statement particular for a rector of this parish in his first year. It is courageous, concise, serious, and challenging.

Articulates a basic concept of moral and social responsibility at the heart of the social gospel movement.

Shows remarkable awareness of and sensitivity to the broader population of the city

He wants to elevate "humanity". That word is totally inclusive of all persons without limitation.

He speaks of Moral criminality (not sin). In my view he is linking personal responsibility with civic responsibility.

PART II ACTIVITIES OF THE PARISH

Statements of this kind are only important if they are acted upon.

During the rectorship of Fr. Stires the Parish was a beehive of activity.

There was an extraordinary array of initiatives—Many Inge spoke of last lecture

St Thomas Association for Parish Work---

--this was a particularly important set of initiatives to the neighborhoods populated by what the parish called the Industrial poor.

The preface to the 1906 report of this association in the yearbook starts with scripture:

“No man liveth unto himself and no man dieth unto himself” as is true of the Church as of the individual. Beautiful services and impressive messages from the pulpit fail of the larger result if they do not send congregations out to active service in the world. Nearly all well-to-do congregations now realize something of their responsibility to their less fortunate brothers and sisters, and have established numerous “life-saving stations” throughout our great city”

SLIDE 8. ST THOMAS CHAPEL

The St Thomas Chapel on the East Side is such a station.

As Inge pointed out--The St Thomas Free Chapel was established by St Thomas Church on 60th Street between second and third aves. now know as All Saints independent parish. but it was built in 1872 (rebuilt in 1894) as a mission to the populations on the east side. While admission to services and parish life in the

great church on fifth avenue was limited to those who could afford the substantial annual pew rents. The Chapel was free and opened to all. It became a center for voluntary efforts by the fifth avenue congregation in service of the “Industrious Poor.”

By 1904 the array of initiatives at the chapel was extraordinary. Under the eye of Fr Stires and his predecessor Rev John Wesley Brown (1888-1900) and the direct supervision of the Vicar of the chapel:

--This included the Helping Hand association:

The Halsey Day Nursery with its own building on E 59th street

The Employment Society

The Kindergarten

The Mother’s Meetings

The Sewing School—teaching sewing to the population—how to repair clothing

The Penny Provident Fund—small savings society

The Girls Friendly Society

The Kitchen Garden

The Diet Kitchen

The Maternity Society

The Visiting Nurse

---The Cobbling Classes—teaching people how to repair their shoes

---The Boy’s club for youth in the neighborhood of the chapel

---- The St. Thomas Troop of the Knights of Temperance. Where young men “were trained in the habits of soberness, purity,, and reverence—no pledge being required of the members, who are simply given to understand that loyalty to the aims of the society. Is a matter of individual honor”

--The Employment Association

---The Woman's Auxiliary.

They provided scholarships "choosing and training of some particular boy or girl, giving them the broad liberal Christian education that they in turn may teach their brethren.

-- The Missionary Guild—supporting the Episcopal missions

They prepared boxes of books, clothing and other items to be shipped to missions around the world.

--The Domestic Committee—sending goods around the nation

--The Foreign Committee---sending goods abroad

--The Church Periodical Club Send books, periodicals, hymnals to congregations in Mexico, Japan, China

--The Indian Committee. Scholarships and medical supplies for missions in the Dakotas and Wyoming

--The Freedman Committee. scholarships and "boxes" for presumably black parishes and institutions in the southern states.

--The Mexican Committee.

--Diocesan or City Missions. Support for two chapels in the Bronx. "For colored peoples."

--Missions to Colored People. Boxes sent to churches in Kansas, South Carolina Virginia, Tennessee, With a value of nearly \$400. This was at a time with the average worker wage was between \$200 and \$400 per year.

---The Industrial School-primarily teaching women skills to be self supporting

Report of the Vicar of St Thomas's Chapel to Dr Stires. 1905 report

"While recognizing the grace of human sympathy and the beauty of human helpfulness, we do not forget that the motive for both must be found in something

else, higher than either, if they are to endure and become permanent factors in Moulding character. It is difficult to continue long in well doing unless the inspiration and the power are drawn from sources higher than the thing done.

R. R. Clairborne. Vicary

SLIDE 9. OUTLINE

PART THREE COMPLICATIONS

But in the end it was difficult why? Stires articulates a simple formula of those who have helping those in need to the benefit of everyone. But it was always challenging. Locally it was hard to keep pace with the rapid change in the city. The 1906 yearbook notes:

But still the report goes on to note that the chapel was exceedingly busy making 37,079 House visits and 16,930 office calls in the years 1901-1906.

But there were larger forces integral to the general welfare of the population of the city that complicated Stires simple and direct message. I want to briefly note just FOUR:

- 1- Labor Unions
- 2- The Russian Revolution
3. The emergence of the Social Sciences
4. The Great Depression of the 1930s

And here I am not attempting to take on these factors within the broad sweep of history. RATHER, My purpose here is just to indicate how larger forces at the start of the 20th century complicated the idea of Christian charity as articulated by Stires and embodied in the social gospel movement.

SLIDE 10. Triangle fire

I—LABOR UNIONS

You will recall that

On March 25, 1911, the well known [Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire](#) in [Greenwich Village](#) took the lives of 145 mostly Italian and Jewish female garment workers. The stunning event ignited the progressive forces: There was a push to improve the city's fire department, building codes, and workplace regulations.^[45] Reaction to the disaster spurred the growth of the [International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union](#),

That union, formed in 1900, was a major player in the [American Federation of Labor](#). It grew rapidly in its first two decades and took credit for abolishing sewing work in the [tenements](#), establishing a six-day, 54-hour week, writing union contracts that gave preference to ILGWU members applying for a job, and setting up arbitration machinery.

SLIDE 11. -- Union demonstration in Union Square

The Union movement raised issues of what constituted a just wage, a protected work environment, and the larger issue of the inequalities of the industrial age.

In all these discussions the ideas of what constitutes Christian Charity, at the heart of Stire's mission, were pushed by newer formulations of social justice and control. Where Charity was at the discretion of the giver. Social justice was determined more by the receiver.

The idea of Christian charity was then complicated by issues of control, expectations, and limits.

SLIDE 12.--

2. The Russian Revolution

In 1917, the total nationalization of the economy of Russia and the consequent wiping out of private capital sent shock waves through the upper echelons of the NYC population whose fortunes rested the institutions of private enterprise.

The fact that [Vladimir Lenin's Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party](#) could undermine the Tsarist regime demonstrated in terms all too real that a popular labour-led movement could successfully take over the reins of government.

The reaction in the USA was swift.

There was the so called “Red Scare” that began toward the end of [World War I](#).

U.S. Attorney General [A. Mitchell Palmer](#) carried out a series of raids against foreign-born individuals who were accused of [anarchist](#), communist, and [radical](#) leftist sympathies. The [Palmer Raids](#), which were sometimes brutal and of questionable constitutionality, drew increasing [criticism](#) from the public as they failed to produce evidence of a Bolshevik conspiracy.

Here in NYC. in the 1920s the ILGWU was torn by battles between the established leadership and communists within the group.

As we know, the philosophical and ideological origins of the Bolshevik revolution drew from the philosophical writings of Karl Marx. The most notable of the critics of the dislocations brought on by the industrial age.

SLIDE 13. Socialism

Marx embraced the idea of socialism and would famously argue in 1875. From each according to his abilities and to each according his needs

It was atheistic . Marx in 1844 famously stating that “religion is the opium of the people”

And it was militant. at the base of the (MARx and Engles) communist manifesto of 1848Workers of the world unite—you have nothing to lose but your chains.

Stires simple message could in many ways be interpreted as a kind of Christian socialism—calling for a redistribution of money from those who have too much to those who have too little and it is important to emphasise to the BENEFIT OF BOTH GROUPS>

But the Russian Revolution brought a fear as to how far this could go and who would control the process.

The Christian charity at the heart of Stires message raised questions of socialism and socialism was linked to communism, communism was linked to atheism. So it became more difficult to navigate this message among these forces for change.

SLIDE 14. John Dewey

3. The rise of the social sciences

The third of these developments is far less appreciated than the other two

In the late nineteenth century the new field of experimental psychology was spreading from the German speaking world throughout the west. These psychologists were looking at new ways to understand “the spiritual nature of the universe.’ Much of this thinking was fueled by the enormous social transformations brought on by urban industrial economies. While not a rejection of christianity outright it challenged the authority of religion on matters of self identity, community, and the moral order.

The root of this new mode of thinking was the observation that instead of thinking of ourselves exclusively as the creation of a higher power, they argued that we humans are **ourselves of our own creation**. So essentially coming to grips with who we are was not a spiritual question but rather a question of our place in the wider community of humanity. Who we are and what we are then is a matter of more complete self understanding.

It is also how we understand ourselves in relationship to others, and how others perceive us. And interact with us. All relationships were thus important. Parent-child, mother daughter, husband wife, teacher child, neighbor to neighbor, worker-supervisor. We as people, then, are individually and collectively a product of our environment.

The challenge then was two fold.

First How to come to an understanding of how our broader social environment is determinant in who we are and what we have become. This was especially complicated given the fact that humanity and its environment is in constant flux.

Second If individuals are shaped by these environmental factors, could they then intervene in their own development. Could that process of change be applied to society as a whole, thus reshaping the social nature of natural man on earth.

Salvation was not only redemption after death but more importantly we could all be changed by understanding and thus reshaping the nature and structure of our social environment now

This was the thrust of the social sciences that appeared in the most prominent universities in the USA in the late nineteenth century. The idea of the research university was among other things, a place where the constant change of the environmental factors shaping our lives would be studied with the results applied to a changing world. These studies would be focused more on corrective action than spiritual renewal

SO we had courses and studies in Social Psychology, Sociology, Social behaviorism This is the school of thought led by John Dewey, William James and George Herbert Mead among many others.

SLIDE 15. William James

We also had projects to affect the social environment:--to achieve “human betterment” and social change

Many were positive like the playground movement. St Thomas’s summer home for children fell in this category.

Food and drug safety

Urban housing design and projects

The idea of special courts for juvenile offenders

There were less attractive initiatives:

Eugenics

Voluntary sterilization

Where labor unions had pushed Christian Charity toward ideas of social justice, and the events in Russia toward matters of Ideology, Social Science and its emphasis on observation of human action, on research, on environmental change pushed ideas of charity into the broader research agenda of American Universities and practical solutions. This was Pragmatism.

Where the churches observed the problem and took action the universities studied the problem and looked to government and other organizations to take action. They influenced local governments on education and social programs and churches too. Charity was not only a helping hand but it was also a matter of identifying and transforming the roots and effects of poverty and want.

SLIDE 16. The great depression

4. The Great Depression

All this was further complicated by the Great Depression of the 1930s

We all know the great crash of the stock market in 1929, but the Great Depression marked the years following. Those years were characterized by consequent collapse of the economy in general.

In New York City, for example, in 1932, half the city's factories were closed, almost one-third of New Yorkers were unemployed (vs. one-quarter of the rest of the country)

These numbers challenged the traditional role of the Churches to reach out and help. The scale of the problem was well beyond their capacity.

Governments at the local level in conjunction with private agencies including churches began to raise and allocate funds to provide aid. 1.6 million New Yorkers were in need. The city began to look for assistance from the State of New York. To give some perspective to this, the report of St. Thomas Chapel in 1931 noted that it had given aid to 600 families –a huge commitment but clearly a drop in the bucket given the extent of the problem.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, not as president, but as Governor of New York State., unique among governors at the time chose to accept liability for his constituents.

He declared: “upon the State falls the duty of protecting and sustaining those of its citizens who, through no fault of their own, find themselves... unable to maintain life.” Essentially he was saying (not without controversy) that charity is a government responsibility.

To make a long story short, Roosevelt became president in 1932 and launched the famous New Deal program of economic assistance and reform.

Given the scale of the New Deal and its premise that social welfare was to a great extent the responsibility of government, the idea of Christian charity was absorbed into questions of public policy, political affiliation, and ideology.

For purposes of this lecture and by way of closing I want to focus not so much on what the New Deal was or what it accomplished, but rather on how Roosevelt chose to explain it to a skeptical public.

He did not choose the rhetoric of the trade unions, or even of social justice, He did not set it in ideological terms of a progressive socialism, nor did he attempt to set it within the prevailing ideas and research results derived from the social sciences.

Rather he really sermonized on the issues. His words interestingly echo Stires sense of moral imperative.

Slide 18. FDR. First inaugural address:

The money changers have fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilization. We may now restore that temple to the ancient truths. The measure of the restoration lies in the extent to which we apply social values more noble than mere monetary profit.

Happiness lies not in the mere possession of money; it lies in the joy of achievement, in the thrill of creative effort. The joy and moral stimulation of work no longer must be forgotten in the mad chase of evanescent profits. These dark days will be worth all they cost us if they

teach us that our true destiny is not to be ministered unto but to minister to ourselves and to our fellow men.

FDR Second inaugural address

I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.

2
8

It is not in despair that I paint you that picture. I paint it for you in hope—because the Nation, seeing and understanding the injustice in it, proposes to paint it out. We are determined to make every American citizen the subject of his country's interest and concern; and we will never regard any faithful law-abiding group within our borders as superfluous. The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little

CONCL

Stire's words were part of a movement at his time to achieve a vision of Christian charity and a just world. I have no knowledge if Stires ever met FDR. Surely their paths crossed. But I cannot say that FDR was quoting Stires. BUt I think He chose this line of argument as a good politician because clearly this way of thinking was in the air. People for the most part would recognize the points and understand the context. It speaks to the role of the pulpit at that time and in our lives today.

In the end we are still faced with the challenge that Fr. Stires so eloquently addressed in that 1901 yearbook. How do we find the right balance between what to give and what to keep. Today it seems even more complicated raising the question of the very nature of charity itself. Is it a matter of politics? a matter of government policy? A matter of political ideology? a matter of social understanding? A matter of tax deductibility? But lost in the debates today are the two essential points about charity that were emphasized by Fr. Stires more

than a century ago at this church. First it is a matter of faith and second it is a matter of spiritual fulfillment **both to** the person who receives and **to** the person who gives.