

**REDISCOVERING THE HEART OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION:
THE NORMATIVE THEORY OF *IN HIS STEPS***

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(ABSTRACT)

Public administration literature lacks richness and context regarding the moral history of the founding of the field in the early 1900s. As a result, current calls for “recapturing the soul” of public administration have failed to stimulate a theory—or even a working understanding—of how to “rehydrate” the observed desiccation of public life and revivify the concept of the public interest. In correcting the historical record, this dissertation shows that the “soul” of public administration stemmed from the field’s deep roots in the social gospel movement of the early 20th century. For that short period, the nascent field was not viewed as a bastardization of constitutional order, but as a noble endeavor in which beloved sons and daughters participated in their nation’s governance. As a representative character of that era, Charles M. Sheldon serves as an exemplar of a citizen administrator whose sojourn into the public square was characterized by deep faith, empathy for the common person and commitment to action—regardless of the personal cost. His optimism, innovation and creativity stand in sharp relief to today’s dispirited and over-regulated public work force. Sheldon’s best-selling book, *In His Steps* (1896), stands as a pre-modern parable for moral decision-making in a dynamic and uncertain postmodern environment. In allowing for uncertainty, discourse and experimentation, the book’s operative question, “What would Jesus do?” enriches our understanding of normative theory as process. It also offers back the field’s lost “soul” in the way of submission, empathy, covenant, grace and hope.

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Chapter 1 - Overview

From its founding as a self-conscious activity in the early 20th century, the field of public administration has struggled to reconcile the dual roles of politics and administration. Are public administrators simply managers and implementers—or should they, like elected officials, have a special relationship with and affinity for the people? Are they Men of Reason, using tools, technique and technology to “fix” the nation’s problems—or should they be listening, engaging and empathetic public servants? Such are the questions of normative theory.

This tension is not the administrator’s alone; rather, it is a reflection of the incommensurable elements built into the American experiment known as a constitutional republic. The audacious notion that the republican ideals of civic virtue, public participation and concern for the common good could survive in a constitutional structure resting on self-love and self-interest continues to reverberate through administrative history. While both republican and constitutional streams run deeply through American soil, time and time again, the constitutional view has held dominant sway.

We see inklings of the tension in the nation’s two most revered founding documents: the Declaration of Independence, with its lofty appeals and appeal to Nature’s God, and the Constitution, equipped with road-maps and instructions for the day-to-day business of governing. The tension reappears in the passionate Federalist/Anti-Federalist debates of the late 1780s concerning the ratification of the proposed constitution. Writing as Publius, the Enlightenment-bred Federalists argued strenuously for a strong and vigorous government; a machine-like structure with greatly enhanced power and jurisdiction and checks and balances to supply the “defect of better motives.” In contrast, the Anti-Federalists—generally agrarian, religious and republican in outlook—opposed the

consolidation of power under the proposed constitution, preferring to entrust the nation's destiny to the civic and moral virtue of the people.¹

Developments during the first century of nationhood belie the notion that the incommensurable elements of our national infrastructure had been adequately assuaged by constitutional fiat. The century that saw the vast westward expansion, the devastation of civil war, the rise of the robber baron and ensuing social “volcanoes,” landed on the doorstep of the 20th century disillusioned—and open to another model of conducting public life. With hopes pinned on sleeves, reformers sought to resurrect republican virtues by way of an activist government in which citizen and public administrators would play a healing role.

The healing tendencies of the new era took several forms. As Stivers has shown, turn-of-the-century women's benevolent movements administered an important social safety net. Similarly McSwite has identified pragmatism as a needed “vent” by which civic virtue, the calling card of the Anti-Federalists, blew (however briefly) into the hearts and minds of government reformers. The participative working wisdom, or “phronesis,” of both the benevolent and pragmatist movements offered to assuage the incommensurable elements of the constitutional order. The focus of these movements on action, collaboration and experimentation offered a way to scale the high wall between politics and administration, between mind and heart, between being and doing.

¹ Gordon Wood makes a similar point in *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*: “Indeed, a long-existing split in the American mind between what has been called the evangelical scheme and the legal scheme was not conspicuously revealed. Although many Americans in 1776 had blended and continued to blend both schemes in an uneasy combination, the event of the 1780s were forcing a separation between those who clung to moral reform and the regeneration of men's hearts as the remedy for viciousness and those who looked to mechanical devices and institutional contrivances as the only lasting solution for America's ills. It was a basic division that separated “unlightened” from “enlightened,” Calvinist from Liberal and ultimately Antifederalist from Federalist.” p. 428.

But the parting of the clouds was to be short-lived. The literature of the field has shown that this watershed moment in administrative history was soon eclipsed by the rise of scientific management, professionalization and Weberian bureaucracy. During what is termed the field's "classical period," Wilson and Goodnow reduced public administration to an instrumental role in governance to ensure that sovereignty rested with the legislature. Later, during the New Deal period, Gulick and Urwick pushed the field toward administrative management, in which efficiency, expertise and technique were enshrined as hallmarks of the trade. But instead of healing the breach, the turn toward cool-headed expertise exacerbated the underlying tensions in national life. Neutral government experts operated under the illusion that they could hold the people at arm's length and apply administrative antiseptic to the nation's wounds. As Rohr points out, this distancing of the people from their government is the source of all illegitimacy of democratic government.

Not much has changed in the subsequent decades. From the field's embrace of behavioralism and functionalism, to its acquiescence to the rise of the managerial presidency, to its deep fondness for "reinventing," public administration has sought vainly for the "silver bullet" to address the problem of legitimacy. Extremely low voter turn-out rates, prolonged government shutdowns, the horrific bombing of a federal facility are but the most recent symptoms of governance in crisis.

In the scurry to find alternatives to models based on expertise, many have looked back to the rich reform period—also known as orthodox public administration—for clues. Unfortunately, our understanding of this period is incomplete.

To the feminine and pragmatist models already mentioned, I would add a third: the ethos of practical Christianity. Embodied in the social gospel movement, this ethos served to motivate collective action and brought a spirit of servanthood and calling to public

endeavors. It is a story that been overlooked to the detriment of the field. Without a complete understanding of the original source of the “soul” of public administration, we can never hope to “recapture” it or refound the field as a moral enterprise, as the authors of the Blacksburg “manifesto” have suggested.

Such is one purpose of this dissertation: to examine the historical context of the refounding period and identify and disentangle the religious strand of public administration. A second, and perhaps more important contribution, is my attempt to “reweave” this forgotten strand into our normative theorizing about the field.

The Religious Strand

Religion certainly has played significant roles throughout American history. As we consider the second founding period of public administration, however, the piece of the strand we are most interested in is the Social Gospel. While many theologians and reformers made significant contributions to the social gospel movement, it was Kansas preacher Charles M. Sheldon who translated the new theological thinking into the vernacular and turned the religious populace from pietism to activism. His achievements as a social innovator and citizen administrator are laudable on their own merits, but he is remembered most for the 1896 *In His Steps*, a runaway best-seller believed to be the second most widely read book after the Bible. With its simple and practical adage, “What would Jesus do?” *In His Steps* ignited a brush-fire interest in practical Christianity and social reform.

Most likely it was the simplicity of the tale that captured the imagination of Christians and secularists alike. Following their minister's example, a small group of worshippers pledged for one year to “not do anything without first asking, What would Jesus do?” Like a pebble dropped into a pond, the Christian discipleship of a railroad superintendent, a singer, a newspaper editor and an heiress generated profound ripples of

restoration and healing throughout the fictional town of Raymond, nearby communities and eventually across the nation. According to McSwite, *In His Steps* “portrays America as attempting to heal itself from the ravages of a period of socially unmediated individualistic *competition* by finding a way of institutionalizing social *cooperation* as its official way of life.”²

The pledge to “do as Jesus would do” was not prescriptive, objective or rationalistic. Rather than offering a new moral code, it offered a new way of relating to the uncertainties of modern life. But in all its subjectivity, it was as liberating as it was challenging. The decisions came out of the fabric of the personal life to be nurtured and encouraged within relationships. In the book, the small (and growing) group of church members who had taken the pledge met weekly to question, listen, offer suggestions and, most importantly, to lay hold of through prayer the Spirit they shared. More than once, the man to whom the church members looked for “answers” was himself quivering, wondering and answering, “I don’t know.”

In His Steps show us that the tenseness, fear and ambiguity involved in moving to a relationship-based ethic are real. Questions go unanswered—and some degree of personal sacrifice or suffering is involved. Sheldon’s archetypal “leader” stands in sharp contrast to McSwite’s “Man of Reason.” Far from stymieing action, the shadows of doubt permit it—one tentative step at a time. In this way, Sheldon holds a lantern to a dim, less traveled path—one that sidesteps both the rational expertise of Whyte’s “light-filled Apollonic world” and the fatalism of Rorty’s midnight darkness, where all we can do is cling together. Illuminated by moral reflection, the action of *In His Steps* represents a type of phronesis, similar to what Stivers detected in the women’s movement of the same period. It is this “third path,” I believe, that offers hope for recapturing the “soul” of PA as envisioned by the Blacksburg authors.

² O. C. McSwite, *Legitimacy in Public Administration, A Discourse Analysis*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage,

The book's impact on the moral history surrounding the development of modern public administration alone make it worthy of doctoral research. According to McSwite, "the enormous success of the book marks a change in the social context that is critical for understanding the transforming American ethos."³ Indeed, commentator Eric Goldman cited it as one of 13 books that changed America along with *The Federalist Papers* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.⁴

But *In His Steps* offers more than a glimpse into history; it offers something of special value to public administrators—clues to our current normative theorizing. If we examine the representative work for its use of parables, we gain insights about our own case study approach. If we examine its reliance on covenantal relationships as a basis for collection action, we gain insights for resuscitating participative government. If we examine it for its grounding in concrete situations and for its struggle against the shadows of uncertainty, we see ourselves operating in the fluid world of administrative discretion.

Normative Theorizing

On my first day on the job as a public servant, I spent the better part of the morning in the agency's personnel office. There I was fingerprinted, photographed, issued a security badge and a key to the ladies' restroom. I filled out numerous forms and decisions on my tax withholdings and health care benefits. Somewhere in the midst of the administrative details and stacks of forms, I was given a piece of paper to read aloud: it was a vow to uphold the Constitution of the United States. The significance of the moment never dawned on me. I was 24, wearing my first blue suit and fresh out of graduate school with a degree in public administration and the honor of being a Presidential Management Intern. Beside that, I was shamefully clueless. When was the

1997), p. 136.

³ Ibid., p. 130.

⁴ Charles M. Sheldon, *In His Steps*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1995), p. ix.

last time I had read the Constitution? Grade school? In graduate school I had been taught how to use data, identify “stakeholders” and write a decent policy analysis. Not to disappoint or slow down the “personnelist” shoving papers my way, I mumbled the vow and signed. Then I was allowed to proceed to my office and begin my working life as one of David Stockman’s junior OMB budget examiners.

Although Stockman was probably already lamenting the “triumph of politics” by the time I came to OMB, my initial overriding impression of the job was the strong reliance on the law. Responsible for developing the President’s budget for several State department accounts, I was immediately provided with numerous thick tan volumes containing a half century’s worth of authorizing and appropriating language related to the conduct of foreign affairs. Get familiar with these, I was instructed. The mammoth budget appendix, the mind-numbing justification of nearly \$1 trillion in spending, was left on my chair with a note: Read and analyze.

Constitutional oath, authorizing statute and tables and tables of numbers that all had to add up. Somewhere in between those three pillars of my job lay a great deal of latitude. What was the U.S. responsibility to refugees in Southeast Asia? How much should we spend to improve the refugee camps—without encouraging greater outflow from those countries? How much should be spent on drug crop eradication in Mexico? Should the United States pay arrears to the U.N? How much should be spent automating the passport application and approval system?

On numerous occasions I remember struggling with the question of what was the “right” thing to do. Certainly I received much input into my budget marks—from seasoned colleagues to political “higher-ups,” from State department personnel to Oval Office dictums about overall budget targets. And certainly my recommendations went through layers of review before becoming Presidential policy—only to be dubbed “dead on

arrival” at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue. Even so, I was not an elected official; nor was I a political appointee. I was a career civil servant; a GS-9 with a fair amount of “power” for one so young and inexperienced. At one point, I remember spending a lunch hour at the nearby Corcoran Art Gallery gazing at a painting of George Washington presiding over the Constitutional Convention. “What would you do?” was my whispered plea.

John Rohr likes to ask the question “Who elected Paul Volcker” in characterizing the problem of administrative discretion. The ability—indeed the necessity—to think and act with some degree of flexibility and discretion—poses an “ethical question for bureaucrats” who, though unelected, participate in the governing process of society.⁵ At a broader level, administrative discretion tends to undermine the legitimacy of public administration as it “strains the principles of representative democracy.”⁶

However, the problem of election vs. nonelection is not the point. As Rohr often reminds his practitioner students: the involvement of a career civil servant in governance is legitimated by the Constitution—not the polls—and fleshed out in its “supporting documents,” *The Federalist Papers* chief among them.⁷ Rather, the real issue is one of accountability:

⁵ John A. Rohr, *Ethics for Bureaucrats, An Essay on Law and Values*, 2nd ed. (New York: Marcel Dekker: 1989), p. 48.

⁶ Camilla Stivers, *Gender Images in Public Administration*, (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993), p. 1.

⁷ John A. Rohr, *To Run a Constitution*, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1986), p. 50. According to Rohr, not only is a vibrant public administration legitimate, it helps remedy the constitutional “defect” of inadequate representation. “...We might as well argue that we have little to fear from today’s massive bureaucracy. Though millions of persons compose the bureaucracy, they are a “select corps” vis a vis the citizenry at large. They are our sons and daughters, or brothers and sisters. They think as we think and feel as we feel. They need not to be an embodiment of arbitrary power; they can be a safeguard against it. They will fulfill this high civic potential only if they interiorize the values. . . of “rule of law, civil liberties and due process.”

“Because bureaucrats govern through authority that is discretionary, and because they are not elected, the ordinary means of popular control are inapplicable. To the extent that formal, legal or institutional controls...are either nonexistent or ineffective, bureaucrats have an ethical obligation to respond to the values of the people in whose name they govern.”⁸

This is where we come to the core of Rohr’s concept of regime values, likely the field’s only work-a-day normative theory of action. The values the career civil servant is ethically obligated to uphold—and build into his or her decision-making—are not passing “whims” but rather constitutional regime values as clarified and interpreted by the Supreme Court. Ethical reflection on these decisions, as enriched by dissenting viewpoints expressed in the debate, is key to developing a civic-minded cadre of civil servants. George Frederickson envisions this theory working like this:

“When we are obliged to implement flawed policy, we must work to enhance the positive and just aspects of the policy. We also must work to ameliorate its weaknesses, contradictions and overreaching goals. We must work to make the policy we implement as just and compassionate as possible. And we must resist, thwart or refuse to implement policy that runs counter to the founding documents or to American regime values.”⁹

Rohr’s concept of regime values shines a needed light in the tunnel. Unfortunately, it fails to provide enough “wattage” for the average public servant. I know of no one in government who regularly reads court cases save legal counsel—and even then it is hardly for the purpose of ethical reflection. Even if public servants had the time and inclination to reflect on the oath they had all sworn to, serious practical questions remain.

⁸ Rohr, *Ethics for Bureaucrats*, p. 4.

⁹ H. George Frederickson, *The Spirit of Public Administration*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), p. 229.

How does one actually apply broad regime values to specific situations? Are all values equally compelling? How does one trade off one value against another? For example, justice is a regime value, but justice for whom? Does that include future generations? The unborn? To what effect will justice for one group limit the freedom (another regime value) of another?

The problem is further complicated by the fact that regime values are not the only ones perpetuated throughout government agencies. Institutions espouse their own core values, and survival is not the least of them. Economy and efficiency, values put forth by Progressive-era reformers as the cure-all for corrupt “machine” politics may not be enshrined in Supreme Court documents, have nevertheless reigned as core administrative values throughout this century. These values will increasingly come into conflict with regime values if the proponents of entrepreneurial government reform have any sway.

Finally, there are the more corrosive values of self-interest and careerism. Rare is the civil servant who is willing to promote regime values at the expense of personal power or prestige. As Frederickson points out, even if one knows, understands and can apply regime values, what *motivates* one to do so? On what basis do we expect public servants to work to guarantee the regime values to others within the citizenry?

I would argue that we expect this on a moral basis. Willingness to extend regime values to all Americans does not come from a hastily mouthed oath. It does not come from professional standards, or regulations or oversight. Rather, it comes from the heart. Citing Frederickson, commitment to correct principles is not enough: public servants must genuinely care for their fellow citizens.”¹⁰ Only when there is “conscious knowledge on the part of citizens that they are loved by the bureaucracy” can there be a

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 197.

“special relationship” between the public and the public servant.¹¹ Or, as Wamsley notes, “efficiency should not be the last consideration, but certainly one that comes well after serving our fellow citizens, upholding constitutional values and the creation of relationships that evoke human and democratic development.”¹²

Summary

We have reached the nexus of the two main arteries of this dissertation: the point at which the forgotten religious strand of public administration can help inform and inspire our normative theorizing about the field. Building on the concept of regime values, the criteria for enriching such a theory are several. First, any contribution must be at once coherent and practical—a theory already sprouting arms and legs that can be packed like a bag lunch and carried each day to the desk or bureau or agency. In addition, it must acknowledge the degree of uncertainty—even chaos—that lurks in the realm of administrative discretion. Finally, it must be democratic in nature, fostering openness, connection and dialogue between citizens and the government that serves them.

Based on my analysis of how Sheldon, *In His Steps* and the larger social gospel movement influenced the intellectual development of our field, I conclude that the axiom What would Jesus do? meets these criteria and contributes to our understanding of normative theory as process. Furthermore, the analysis suggests that incorporating submission, empathy, covenant, grace and hope into a work-a-day theory of norms and values will help public administrators shed their identities as unfeeling experts and restore them to the ideal of well-beloved sons and daughters participating fully in their nation’s governance.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 201.

¹² Gary L. Wamsley, “A Public Philosophy and Ontological Disclosure as the Basis for Normatively Grounded Theorizing in Public Administration,” in Gary L. Wamsley and James F. Wolf, eds., *Refounding Democratic Public Administration, Modern Paradoxes, Postmodern Challenges*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996), p. 355.

Chapter 2 - Strategy and Approach

Any attempt to look back in time, draw conclusions and apply them to present realities is fraught with difficulty. Perspective, values, biases and selectivity all come into play, muddying the waters of historical research. Add to that a focus on the moral history of a given period and the project becomes more problematic still. Whose morals? How representative were they? Since they are neither chronicled as “facts,” or empirically testable, how reliable can any “findings” be?

This is not to say that it shouldn't be attempted. Delving into moral history—with all its pitfalls—provides much-needed richness and context to historical events and developments. According to Higham, moral history deals with the “whole quality of a life, a complex of lives or an age.” In contrast to historical research into causal relationships, moral history “enables us to grasp the moral tone of a particular time and place, to feel the involuntary drift and pressure of its values against a background of alternatives delivered in other times and places.”¹³ As a mode of historiography, moral history shares a kinship with social history. Citing G. M. Trevelyan, J.C. Furnas, author of *The Americans, A Social History of the United States*, ascribes to the view that social history is “history with the politics left out.”¹⁴

Qualitative modes of historical inquiry have gained increased respectability since the general abandonment of progressive assumptions about American history. Up until World War II, historians were generally of one mind that “the underlying movement of American history was in the direction of improvement or betterment.”¹⁵ History was seen as a unidirectional force toward progress, a view that dovetailed nicely into

¹³ John Higham, “Moral Factors,” in Edward Saveth ed., *American History and the Social Sciences*, (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), p. 506.

¹⁴ J.C. Furnas, *The Americans, A Social History of the United States, 1587-1914*, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1969), p. 9.

evolutionary theories of natural science. Setbacks and inconsistencies, while certainly detectable, were seen as “moral holidays” and did not trouble the historical mind focused on ultimate destinies. However, increasing disillusionment about the “progress” of the American century ensured that, by the 1950s, the “grand design” of history had become a “grand illusion.”¹⁶

The professionalization of history and the allure of scientific objectivity that occurred early this century supplanted earlier notions that history was primarily a morality tale with didactic usefulness. With the dismantling of the progressive view of history, concern for the moral fabric of an era has come back in vogue. Whereas the progressive historian focused on public (as opposed to private) morality, impersonal social forces and means over ends, newer strands of historical research are open to “a richer knowledge of human motivation.” As Reinhold Niebuhr points out,

“ultimately the problems of human conduct and social relations are in a different category from the relations of physical nature. . . . Moreover, the ability to yield to the common good, to forego special advantages for a larger measure of social justice, to heal the breach between warring factions by forgiveness, or to acknowledge a common human predicament between disputants in a social situation, in the fruit of a social wisdom to which science makes only ancillary contributions. This type of wisdom involves the whole of man in the unity of his being.”¹⁷

Thus recast as a respectable mode of inquiry, moral history takes “whatever shape seems best suited to elaborate the problematical *qualities* of experience.” It is a passionate

¹⁵ Higham, p. 497.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, “Faith and History,” in Leonard M. Marsak, ed., *The Nature of Historical Inquiry*, (New York: Holt, Rinehard and Winston, 1970), p. 130.

research, one which requires the “participation in history as a subjective experience.”¹⁸

A textbook on qualitative research methods calls for a historical narrative account that is “flowing, revealing, vibrant and alive.”¹⁹

Representative Characters

One way to highlight the moral history of a given period is through the use of a representative character. The technique is not new. In his 1850 essay entitled *Representative Men*, Ralph Waldo Emerson posits Napoleon as a representative character of the reigning ethos of American success thanks to his “practicality, prudence and directness, his powers of synthesis and cool audacity.”²⁰ In her lectures on Kant’s political philosophy, Hannah Arendt, herself a moral historian, explores Kant’s notion of exemplary validity. Reminiscent of Plato, the argument suggests that beneath all secondary qualities of a table, for example, “the remainder is a table in general, containing the minimum properties common to all tables.” As it pertains to the usefulness of a representative character, the “very particularity” of the exemplary table “reveals the generality which otherwise could not be defined.”²¹

In *Habits of the Heart*, Bellah *et. al.* use representative characters to provide “a concentrated image [of] the way people in a given social environment organized and give meaning and direction to their lives.” Representative characters are not

“abstract ideals or faceless social roles, but are realized in the lives of those individuals who succeed more or less well in fusing their individual personalities

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 506.

¹⁹ Bruce L. Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, 2nd ed, (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995), p. 161.

²⁰ Milton Konvitz and Stephen Whicher, eds., *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1962), p. 90.

²¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Publ., 1978), p. 272.

with the public requirements of those roles. It is this living reenactment that gives cultural ideals their power to organize life.”²²

Public Administration has its own use for representative characters or exemplars. The 1992 *Exemplary Public Administrators* portrays a variety of representative characters whose stories “focus on certain critical events in these administrator’s lives that reveal their characters.” According to editor Terry Cooper, “judging character is essential the clarification of an ethos for public administration. Exemplars offer both the empirical judgment of code, theory and principle and hopeful evidence of their practical possibilities...It is the means through which we may truly learn what constitutes a public administration ethic.”²³

To focus my investigation of the moral history of the social reform era of the early 20th century, I use Charles M. Sheldon as a representative character. Best-selling author and innovative and tireless citizen administrator, Sheldon “provides an ideal, a point of reference and focus, that gives living expression to a vision of life.”²⁴ Sheldon also served as a “symbol transformer,” helping guide the populace through the dizzying turn-of-the-century era by infusing known and comforting symbols with fresh meaning and purpose.²⁵

Researching the life and works of Charles Sheldon took me to latter-day Topeka, Kansas, where postmodern realities were constantly bombarding century-old artifacts. By interspersing these personal impressions with academic research, the stance I take is not one of “judge of the dead,” but rather an active “participant in their affairs.”²⁶

²² Bellah et. al, p. 39-40.

²³ T. L. Cooper and N.D. Wright, *Exemplary Public Administrators*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992), p. 339.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 40.

²⁵ Martin E. Marty, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land, 500 Years of Religion in America*, (New York: Penguin, 1984), p. 148.

²⁶ Higham, p. 504.

Another trip—by crabbing boat to the island of Tangier, Virginia—allowed me to participate in a history-making event. My focus there was not on a single representative character but on an entire community, as townsfolk from that environmentally threatened island developed and articulated a common vision of the future. Based in biblical principles, the vision was nevertheless enthusiastically endorsed by observing officials from a variety of federal, state and local government agencies, as well as environmental and conservancy groups.

Religion

Truly we live in a quixotic age of religious pluralism and revivalism, edgy religious tolerance and a tight separation between church and state. Even so, religion's half-century retreat (or banishment, depending on how you look at it) from the public square appears to be ending. If heightened interest in religion's role is any indication, the question going forward will not be *if* faith should be allowed to penetrate the public square—but rather what form should it take.

Extending an unlikely welcome to the slowing of the Enlightenment trend of secularization is Guenter Lewy, who describes himself as “neither a Christian or a theist.” Lewy set out to prove that religion was a useless relic of the nation's past, but changed his mind after examining religion's variegated track record in positively molding society. In *Why America Needs Religion, Secular Modernity and its Discontents*, Lewy defends his belief that despite religion's pathologies—racism being one—“our culture cannot maintain its moral integrity unless religious belief once again becomes a constituent part of its intellectual foundation.”²⁷

²⁷ Guenter Lewy, *Why America Needs Religion, Secular Modernity and Its Discontents*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 131.

Even if one accepts this view, many may feel more comfortable admitting a nonsectarian or universalist religion into the intellectual foundation. However, as Martin Marty notes:

“The Judeo-Christian religious phenomenon is as much a part of our landscape as a glacial moraine is a semi-permanent part of the landscape where a glacier has been. The Protestant deposit may not be the working, living faith of later Americans, but they [find] it difficult to devote themselves to variations of this faith without some reference to the original symbols. In the American case, these included words from Protestantism, Puritanism and Evangelicalism.”²⁸

Setting aside for a moment current wariness toward moralistic Christian politics, these symbols can serve as street lamps on a dark night. As Bellah insists, if we are to experience some sort of national “conversion,” or “turning away from the preoccupations with self toward some larger identity, we must recover the stories and symbols in whose terms it makes sense.”²⁹ For example, citing a survey reported in Robert Wuthnow’s 1991 book, *Acts of Compassion: Caring for Others and Helping Ourselves*, Lewy states that:

“Americans who know the story of the Good Samaritan are far more likely than those ignorant of the parable to be involved in charitable activities, donate their time to voluntary organizations, care for someone who is sick, give money to a charity and so on.”³⁰

In addition to replenishing moral capital, plumbing America’s religious tradition for clues to a normative theory also promises to increase social capital. As defined and popularized by Robert Putnam, social capital refers to “features of social organization,

²⁸ Marty, p. 220.

²⁹ Bellah, et. al., xxxi.

³⁰ Lewy, p. 80.

such as networks, norms and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.”³¹ Claiming that religion is just about the only institution in American society that has not experienced an alarming decline in social capital, Bellah points out:

“When we consider how to renew the cultural capacity for community and solidarity... it would be well to remember . . . that in American society religious associations have the strongest hold on their members and almost alone have the capacity to reach individuals in every class.”³²

Reminiscent of Tocqueville, Bellah reminds us that within our rich religious tradition lies the antidote to rampant materialism, individualism and careerism, all identified as problematic for reviving civil discourse and a revived public administration. It was not until Tocqueville entered America’s 19th century churches, pulpits aflame with righteousness, that he understood the source of the nation’s goodness—and greatness.

Fiction

In *Public Administration Illuminated and Inspired by the Arts*, editors Goodsell and Murray argue that “the applied, practical and instrumental processes and products of administration can be infused with insight and inspiration from the processes and products of artistic achievement.”³³ To that end, they construct five “bridges” between the “hurly-burly” sphere of public administration and “a rich source of cultural nourishment.” One bridge in particular—the Values Bridge—relies on fiction to “translate into concrete form such norm-laden abstractions as power, ambition, survival,

³¹ Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work, Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), p.

³² Bellah et. al., p. xxxi.

³³ Charles T. Goodsell and Nancy Murray, *Public Administration Illuminated and Inspired by the Arts*, (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), p. 5

caring and vision.”³⁴ Howard McCurdy adds that fiction offers “insights into subjective reality that a dying positivism cannot.”³⁵

Taking this cue, I cross the “values bridge” into the realm of administrative fiction using *In His Steps* by Charles M. Sheldon. Like Marini in his exploration of *Antigone*, by examining *In His Steps*—and urging a fresh application of its message and method—I attempt to tap a “fruitful source of opportunity to reflect upon the ethical challenges facing modern public administrators.”³⁶

Fiction also is an important tool for helping unearth the social and moral history of the reform period that gave public administration its identity as a field. McCurdy cites examples from the history of public policy that illustrate how ideas that begin in “small pockets of society” and which are fanned by the arts often come to be embraced by the wider culture and embodied in official government policy.³⁷ By altering public perception and imagination even popular fiction can “break down old barriers and make new activities acceptable. It can also restrict the scope of public activities.”³⁸

The powerful influence of stories can be seen most dramatically in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Even setting aside Lincoln’s infamous exaggeration, who exclaimed upon meeting the author, “So you’re the lady who started the War,” we can see in the pages of the novel powerful forces going to work on the public mind. In the following scene, Senator John Bird, an antebellum Man of Reason, has just waxed eloquently about the need for the fugitive slave law. Now he is at home defending his stance before the “public”—his wife Mary:

³⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

³⁶ Frank Marini, “The Uses of literature in the Exploration of Public Administration Ethics: The Example of *Antigone*,” *Public Administration Review*, vol. 52, (September/October, 1992), p. 420.

³⁷ Howard E. McCurdy, “Public Policy and Popular Imagination,” in Charles Goodsell and Nancy Murray, eds., *Public Administration Illuminated and Inspired by the Arts* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995) p. 177.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 187.

And what is the law? It don't forbid us to shelter these poor creatures a night, does it, and to give 'em something comfortable to eat, and a few old clothes, and to send them quietly about their business?

Why, yes, my dear; that would be aiding and abetting, you know....

Mrs. Bird rose quickly, with very red cheeks, which quite improved her general appearance, and walked up to her husband, with quite a resolute air, and said, in a determined tone,—“Now, John, I want to know if you think such a law as that is right and Christian?”

You won't shoot me, now, Mary, if I say I do!

You ought to be ashamed, John!

But, Mary, listen to me. Your feelings are all quite right, dear and interesting, and I love you for them; but then, dear, we mustn't suffer our feelings to run away our judgment; you must consider it's not a matter of private feeling,—there are great public interests involved, there is such a state of agitation rising, that we must put aside our private feelings.

Now, John, I don't know anything about politics, but I can read my Bible; and there I see that I must feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and comfort the desolate; and that Bible I mean to follow.

But in cases where your doing so would involve a great public evil—

*Obeying God never brings on public evils. I know it can't. It's always safest, all around, to **do as he** bids us."*

Now, listen to me, Mary, and I can state to you a very clear argument, to show—

I hate reasoning, John, especially reasoning on such subjects. There's a way you political folks have of coming round and round a plain right thing; and you don't believe in it yourselves, when it comes to practice...³⁹

Eventually the senator is faced with his own moral dilemma: Will he help the winsome fugitive couple, Harry and Eliza, even at that moment holed up in his home, to escape to freedom? He does—with substantial effort and against his own best arguments. Sweetly restored to her husband, Mary refrains from telling him, “I told you so.”

The scene is instructive for our purposes as it lays bare the conflict between the “emotional logic of the heart” and the “cold reasoning of the head.” As one commentator stated, Mrs. Beecher’s “emphasis on feeling probably accounts for the immediate success of the book and also defines the degree to which the novel acted as a force in the complicated sequence of events that led to war.”⁴⁰

In like manner, I will show that Charles Sheldon’s *In His Steps* had the same sort of public impact. It captured the popular imagination with a vision of social Christianity that inspired many Progressive-era reforms and fertilized the intellectual seedbed of public administration.

³⁹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, (New York: Signet, 1966), p. 92-94.

⁴⁰ John William Ward in Stowe, p. 478.

Summary

In order to achieve the two purposes of this dissertation—to investigate the moral history of the refounding period of public administration and, based on that knowledge, to enrich our understanding of normative theory—I employ representative characters, religious thought and fiction. Given that the subtext for this dissertation is about administrators who care deeply about the citizens they serve and the issues that affect them, drawing upon the richness of the humanities to stimulate the imagination and touch the heart does not seem inappropriate—even if it is unconventional for a doctoral dissertation.

The remaining six chapters of this dissertation are as follows:

Chapter 3 describes manifestations of the “legitimacy problem” in public administration, such as a dispirited work force, a loss of the sense of public service and public interest and a deepening attenuation between citizens and their government. In addressing the problem of legitimacy, the chapter reviews the literature of the field calling for the need to recapture the “soul” of public administration; to reground the field as a moral enterprise; and the need for a work-a-day normative theory.

Chapter 4 considers the historical role of benevolence in government. Beginning with constitutional design and the Anti-Federalist critique and ending with the rise of populism and the Social Gospel, the chapter examines the role churches did or did not play in supplying the civic virtue needed to curb the excesses of a system grounded in self-interest.

Chapter 5 takes a long look at Charles M. Sheldon, the representative character of an era suffused with public spirit and moral zeal. The chapter examines his life and works, his

writings and his highly publicized views on everything from missionary policewomen to military budgets.

Chapter 6 examines Sheldon's seminal work, *In His Steps*. By exploring the main premise of the book, its impact and influence, the chapter demonstrates that *In His Steps* had a profound impact on the popular culture of the day and provided the moral basis for Progressive-era reforms.

Chapter 7 lays out my contribution to the literature of the field of public administration. My analysis of Sheldon's axiom "what would Jesus do?" enriches the field's concept of normative process theory. In addition, I draw parallels between the parable-like nature of *In His Steps* and our own case-study method. Finally, I show how the essentially religious concepts of submission, empathy, covenant, grace and hope rightfully belong to any normative theory of the field because they were present at the beginning, when the moral fuse of the field was lit.

Chapter 8 exemplifies the normative elements presented in Chapter 7 with a present-day Sheldonesque experience in which faith meets the field of public administration. Two days of public meetings on a tiny island in the Chesapeake Bay—in which watermen find common ground with environmentalists, and bureaucrats stay in the homes of ordinary citizens and listen to their dreams and plans—offer great hope for rediscovering the heart of public administration and democratic governance.

Chapter 3 - The Problem and the Literature

Following a two-year stint at the Office of Management and Budget, I migrated like other good Navy wives down to Norfolk, Virginia where my submariner husband was now at last on *terra firma*—in “drydock” with his ship. Desiring to complete my three-year government tenure, I transferred to the same level job as a budget analyst at St. Julien’s Creek annex, a tiny Navy outpost in nearby Portsmouth. Nothing had prepared me for the culture shock awaiting me.

As an OMB budget examiner, I had studied U.N. and State Department budgets for refugee relief and drug control, devised budget and policy recommendations and defended them before the OMB director. I met with officials from other agencies, traveled to places to see first-hand where the money was going, and cringed when I calculated the meager number of tents, blankets and pairs of shoes my budget mark would buy for the destitute millions in Southeast Asia. For months each fall, I stayed late night after night, working with my colleagues pulling together the annual budget documents. Tired, of course, but more than happy to be part of what I felt was a great civic endeavor, and supplementing my modest pay with psychological income.

I had a very different job as a Navy budget analyst. I prepared funding documents to repair air conditioners and other broken equipment on U.S. fleet ships. I was taught how and where to staple the forms. I was taught how to research an accounting error involving hundreds of obscure codes and acronyms. Once a week I prepared a report, adding up all the money we’d spent by funding source. I never saw what happened to it. I never boarded a ship or knew what in the world we were financing. To a taxpayer, I felt (and was) horribly overpaid. I observed that at 3:30 pm each day, without fail, phones hung up and pencils dropped on desks as my coworkers closed the books and headed home. We had little or no connection with each other or with our Navy “Code” or with

“Washington,” no feel for what we were doing, no sense of purpose. I lasted eight months, one day longer than required to secure my lifelong reinstatement rights and long enough to write this poem *At Government Expense*:

*Overpaid and underworked,
is this another government perk?
Time to dawdle, time to waste,
my work complete, a yawn on face.*

*I'm not alone, I sadly report.
More than one is just plain bored.
Take my boss, a real sensation:
highly paid for work minimization.*

*But those at lowly levels—they
wearily labor all the day.
No moment to waste, no time to dream
of other places and better schemes.*

*Perhaps they are the happier lot,
since they seem content with what they've got.
Those like me will come and go
to pastures greener and not so slow.*

Unfortunately, my experience in St. Julien's Creek is not unique. Pick up any newspaper or public administration textbook today and the story is the same: Government workers are at once dispirited and derided, their work heavily regulated and rule-based, their activities unbeknown or undervalued by the citizens they purport to serve. According to

Lane, the denigration of career civil servants has resulted in a public service that lacks a “normative sense of direction beyond day-to-day operations.”⁴¹

The authors of *Refounding Public Administration* link the problems encountered by modern bureaucrats to a problem of legitimacy, that is, the need to justify the use of discretionary power by unelected career officials. While multifaceted in their response to the legitimacy problem, the authors call for a normative theory of public administration grounded in the “hair shirt” of the public interest.⁴² They bemoan the loss of transcendence that has occurred as professionals have focused exclusively on the means of governance at the expense of the ends.⁴³ In their view, letting the transcendent vision “slip . . . to a narrow focus on the application of value-neutral instrumentalism . . . has cost the nation dearly.” Claiming that we have “washed the soul” out of government, Wamsley calls for a “return to the spirit . . . [that] dealt unabashedly with norms and values.”⁴⁴ Wolf laments the loss of the notion of servanthood and vocation to the sterile concepts of job and career,⁴⁵ and White calls for the need to reassert the field as a “moral enterprise.”⁴⁶

For Lane, the legitimacy problem is directly linked to the individualism problem. In a society increasingly characterized by Tocqueville’s famed “calm and considered feeling,” “the very *publicness* of public administration is inevitably problematic . . . and forms a basis for the rejection of the public enterprise and its institutions.”⁴⁷

⁴¹ Larry Lane, “Individualism, Civic Virtue and Public Administration: The Implications of American Habits of the Heart,” *Administration and Society*, vol. 20, 1988, p. 34.

⁴² Gary L. Wamsley, Robert N. Bacher, Charles T. Goodsell, Philip S. Kronenberg, John A. Rohr, Camilla M. Stivers, Orion F. White, James F. Wolf, *Refounding Public Administration*, (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990), p.

⁴³ The Blacksburg writers stand in direct opposition to the “reinventing” school. For example, Osborne and Gaebler (1993) state that government’s fundamental problem is one of means, not ends—and that the only “spirit” needed is the entrepreneurial spirit.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

⁴⁷ Lane, p. 34.

Without delving into metaphysics, it may be helpful at this juncture to define a few terms. The dictionary definition of the soul is “the animating and vital principle credited with the faculties of thought, action and emotion.” Spirit is similarly defined as “that which is traditionally believed to be the vital principle or animating force within living beings.” David Whyte, in *The Heart Aroused, Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America*, adds that the “soul can never be touched and yet the merest hint of its absence causes immediate distress.”⁴⁸ By transcendence I mean some essence that rises above or across, some higher principle that is in some sense independent from material explanation.

In *The Spirit of Public Administration*, Frederickson adds another term: benevolence. Defined as “broad and unashamed love of people,” benevolence is the essential ingredient that turns mere government administration into *public* administration, that intangible element that gives the field meaning and purpose. Used within the context of public administration, benevolence connotes a commitment to serve a greater collective good thereby transcending the aggregation of individual interests. This “politically significant love” is the animating force that not only puts “energy in the executive” but helps bind the public servant to the citizen and the people to their government. Combined with patriotism, which Frederickson defines as love of regime values, benevolence “binds the public school teacher and the student, the police officer and the threatened, the regulator and the citizen who needs protection.”⁴⁹ In contrast, when public administrators fail to function benevolently, “citizens become alienated from their government and hostile to the public service.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ David Whyte, *The Heart Aroused, Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America*, (New York: Doubleday, 1994) p. 12.

⁴⁹ Frederickson, p. 229.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

At a broader societal level, a number of books in the popular press seem to be on a parallel track, diagnosing public pain in terms of a sick and impoverished public soul. In *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society*, Bellah and company let “middle America” speak their minds and hearts. The authors argue for taking a second look at “biblical tradition,” America’s “second language” after individualism. According to Bellah, community and associational life—where middle America keeps its soul—must be allowed to interpenetrate government and the economy.⁵¹

Christopher Lasch, in *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics*, indicts liberalism’s mantra of progress for the desiccation of American public life. He states that progress, as an “exhausted” ideology, lacks the capacity both to explain events and to “inspire men and women to constructive action.”⁵² He dismisses the “communitarian counterpoint” as simply nostalgia for earlier, more temperate forms of progress.

Sandel makes a similar case in *Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy*. Largely derived through court cases over the past 50 years, the notion of neutral government has taken a “corrosive toll on American public life.”⁵³ This has created, Sandel contends, a “naked public square, inhospitable to religions and empty of moral purposes larger than the pursuit of individual rights and entitlements.” Other books come to mind, ranging from *Trust*, Fukayama’s 1995 diatribe against economic liberalism to Foster’s 1993 attack on positive law in *The Culture of Disbelief*.

The Literature

In the academic world, a few have accepted the challenge laid out by the Blacksburg authors. Describing his book as a “search for the soul and spirit of public

⁵¹ Bellah et. al, p. xxix.

⁵² Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven, Progress and Its Critics*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991), p. 21.

⁵³ Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent, America in Search of a Public Philosophy*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 326.

administration,” Frederickson calls for a “general theory of public administration.” In addition to the well-known concepts of regime values, virtuous citizen administrators and administrative responsiveness, the theory he articulates adds benevolence and love.⁵⁴ In order for the government to “extend the protection of regime values to all citizens,” he states that public administration needs to have—or recreate—a “concept of the public” that is based on benevolent service. This would involve more attention to relating with the citizenry and embracing social equity as the “third pillar” of public administration after economy and efficiency.

To love, Dennard adds emotions. Public administrators, she says, need to come to terms with suffering in public life—rather than attempt to “control all circumstances from a critical distance.”

“This failure to recognize other people’s suffering and instead to standardize it as a statistic or category has also had the effect of insulating administrators from the emotions that might produce new evolutionary insights...We are taught instead that our emotions will “overwhelm” rather than inform us. But this approach has reduced emotions, like the people attached to them, to merely unproductive by-products of history rather than the bridges to democratic relationship.”⁵⁵

Greater empathy with citizens will not only help “heal the wounds of a failed behavioral project,” it will help government mature along with its citizens.

Finally, it seems worth mentioning several papers presented at the July 1997 national conference for the American Society for Public Administration as part of a panel discussion on “Spirituality and Public Administration.” Bruce in “Spirituality in Public

⁵⁴ Frederickson, p. 47.

Service” argues that the “work paradigm” that emerged during the industrial revolution has “shoved spirituality from the workplace,” and that, in an attempt to separate the material from the spiritual, modernity seeks to turn employees into machines.⁵⁶ Rejecting this paradigm, the author states that allowing employees to bring a vaguely defined spirituality into the workplace would alleviate much of the dispiritedness in today’s public sector. Bruce describes the spiritual person as one who loves, but stops short of connecting spirituality with a with a broader understanding of the public interest or reinvigorated civic life.

In “God and Public Administration: Are They Compatible?” Lynch argues that public administration should embrace a universal philosophy based solely on the “spiritual wisdom . . . found between and among the most holy scriptures of all the major religious traditions of the world.”⁵⁷ Rejecting Rohr’s “regime values” as relativistic and positivistic, Lynch wants policy makers to use instead “the common spiritual values of humankind.”⁵⁸

In “The Promethean Spirit in Public Administration: Spirituality Without Crutches,” Miller and Fox defend “a spirit that celebrates human creativity, resourcefulness and acumen—without relying on the crutches of faith, certitude and unambiguous truth.”⁵⁹ Embracing Nietzsche’s infamous “God is dead,” and railing against moralizing Christian conservatives seeking to remake a fictitious Ozzie and Harriet society, the authors

⁵⁵ Linda Dennard, “The Maturation of Public Administration,” in Gary L. Wamsley and James F. Wolf, eds., *Refounding Democratic Public Administration, Modern Paradoxes, Postmodern Challenges*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996), p. 321.

⁵⁶ Willa Bruce, “Spirituality in Public Service,” unpublished paper, National Conference of the American Society of Public Administration, July 1997, p. 9.

⁵⁷ Thomas D. Lynch and Cynthia E. Lynch, “God and Public Administration: Are They Compatible?” unpublished paper, National Conference of the American Society of Public Administration, July 1997, p. 22.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 23.

⁵⁹ Hugh T. Miller and Charles J. Fox, “The Promethean Spirit in Public Administration: Spirituality without Crutches,” unpublished paper, National Conference of the American Society of Public Administration, July 1997, p. 1.

ground their argument in perspectivalism, which denies the existence of transcendent truths. Instead of religious-turned-scientific dogma, the only “spirit” we need is the one of enlightenment rational discourse, while the only “faith” is that we can “figure out what to do next.”⁶⁰

If the Blacksburg authors opened the Pandora’s box of transcendence in public administration, then the Bruce and Lynch papers mark only the first inning of a discussion critical to the future of the field. Highly general and universal to a fault, they push the argument forward very little. In the case of Lynch, it is difficult to imagine policymakers “triangulating” least-common denominator public policy values out of the world’s holy texts.⁶¹ Miller and Fox, on the other hand, refreshingly draw a line in the sand, even if the only spirit they wish to see is a less scientific secular one. It is hard to see how their “solution” answers the Blacksburg call for transcendence. Like the dogma they deplore, their absolute certainty that God is dead is a convenient discourse-stopper and would be a hard-sell to an incorrigibly religious American public, whose government this is after all.⁶²

If the Blacksburg authors called for “recapturing” the spirit of public administration, I presume they think such a thing used to exist and that we lost it somewhere along the way. Far from needing to recreate a new universalist philosophy that means, at once, everything and nothing, I suggest we pull on the threads of spirituality that lace the fabric of American experience and see where they take us. The thread I propose to pull will take us back 100 years to the second “founding” period for public administration.

⁶⁰ Hugh T. Miller and Charles J. Fox, “The Promethean Spirit in Public Administration: Spirituality without Crutches,” unpublished paper, National Conference of the American Society of Public Administration, July 1997, p. 1.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 23.

⁶² Lewy, p. 74. A 1993 survey found that 88 percent of Americans regard religion as “very important” or fairly important.

To some degree, my investigation of the religious and moral contribution to that period will parallel Stivers's study of the contribution of women to the rise of the administrative state. In *Gender Images in Public Administration*, she states that "if nearly half of the inhabitants of the realm of public administration are having experiences that are not taken into account by theories of the administrative state's legitimacy, then it is time to reexamine the basis of these arguments."⁶³ Stivers shows that by virtue of their heavy involvement in early benevolent movements, women practiced a very different administration from the one that was to follow. Theirs was one of the caring, "listening bureaucrat" and of Aristotelian "phronesis," which brings a blend of "intellectual and moral capacities" to bear on public questions.⁶⁴ As Stivers shows, this "working wisdom" proved no match for the Weberian emphasis on rational control, proper method and hierarchy. It was to be the masculine variety of administration that would be the primary legacy of the Progressive era.

My dissertation also dovetails into McSwite's analysis of the occasional—but predictable—bursts of Anti-Federalist spirit into the American socio-political landscape. Having lost the argument with the Federalists, the Anti-Federalists, with their emphasis on "peaceable kingdoms not prosperous markets," hibernated for much of the 19th century.⁶⁵ But as Federalism's pathologies came to light—as evidenced in the concentration of capital and massive labor unrest following Reconstruction—Anti-Federalism rediscovered its voice. Populism was one such venue. As paranoia about the rise of abstract power—particularly seen in the monetary system—spread throughout rural America, Populists echoed the century-old desire for a collaborative government, close to the people and grounded in civic virtue. The Anti-Federalist spirit was spotted again in the cameo appearance of pragmatism. Characterized by a "commitment to

⁶³ Stivers, 1993, p. 19.

⁶⁴ Camilla Stivers, "The Listening Bureaucrat: Responsiveness in Public Administration," *Public Administration Review*, vol. 54, July/August 1994, pp. 364.

⁶⁵ O. C. McSwite, *Legitimacy in Public Administration, A Discourse Analysis*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997), p. 93.

continuous experimentation,” pragmatism was soon eclipsed by the rational choices of the Men of Reason.⁶⁶

Summary

If the Anti-Federalist and feminine roots of public administration were “aborted, distorted and denied,” then so have been the religious roots.⁶⁷ Considering that much of the “women’s work” of the founding period was accomplished through religious charities, and that William Jennings Bryan’s “Cross of Gold” became a rallying point for Populists, these important root systems intertwine. My investigation of the contribution of Charles M. Sheldon and his book, *In His Steps*, to the intellectual history of public administration will invariably touch on these linkages. Based on this complimentary effort to “flesh out” the social and moral milieu of that era, I attempt to weave the lost religious “strand” into a normative theory of public administration. In this way, I hope to meet the Blacksburg challenge laid out in the literature to recapture the soul of administration.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 142.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 122.

Chapter 4 - The Heart of Public Administration

I recall an unsettling conversation I had with a professor of urban affairs—who also was serving as the assistant dean of the college at the time. We were discussing the required readings I had completed for that week’s doctoral class—devastating critiques of the past half-century of urban planning efforts. All a miserable failure was the conclusion, with the postmodern post-script: Why were we so arrogant to believe we could plan anything and execute it successfully in the first place? In response, I said somewhat wistfully that given the grim state of urban affairs, one felt compelled to *do* something. “Ah, there’s that idealism,” the professor scoffed. “Usually we have cured students of that by the end of their freshman year.”

Apparently, showing passionate ideals to the door of public administration is symptomatic of a broader academic problem with metaphysics in general. According to Frederickson, “in contemporary literature, benevolence is given at best a cursory nod as an oddity of intellectual history, but seldom is it suggested that we should take the idea seriously or try to put it into practice. We have almost completely lost the belief that benevolence is essential to democracy.”⁶⁸

Love Constitutional Style

We can trace this uncertainty about benevolence and religion—and about civic virtue in general—back to the founding period. Robert Bellah in *The Broken Covenant* has shown that profound philosophical tensions were built into the American democratic experiment, as reflected by the different natures of our two most important documents: the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

⁶⁸ Frederickson, p. 203.

Embodied in the former, and in line with prevailing sense of national community at the time, was the Jeffersonian model of a republic. As envisioned by Montesquieu and others, the republican ideal was characterized by a high degree of public participation and political equality of citizens—customs that would engender “a willingness of the citizen to sacrifice his own interests for the common good.”⁶⁹ Such a regime would survive, said Montesquieu, only if it is loved by the citizens and only if it succeeded in reproducing citizens motivated by republican virtue. Thus, nurturing civic virtue would be a primary task of the republic—with religion and mores, Tocqueville’s “habits of the heart”—playing an integral role. Indeed, Bellah argues that the Revolutionary War was fought and won as a result of the “remarkable” convergence of the “Puritan covenant and the republican idea.”⁷⁰

Thirteen years later, however, after revolutionary fervor had cooled and attention turned to the actual running of the government, constitutional liberalism emerged as a more attractive means for developing America’s economic and political prowess. Drawing from Hobbes, Locke, Hume and Smith—this tradition “gave rise to what would appear to be the most wildly utopian idea in the history of political thought—that a good society can result from the actions of citizens motivated by self-interest alone when those actions are organized through the proper mechanisms.”⁷¹ By relying on self-interest, which was inimical to public spiritedness, a liberal constitutional regime sets itself directly at odds with classical notions of republican government.

Giving self-interest such a vaulted position in securing individual rights would have been unthinkable without the shared understanding that the people are the “primary controul

⁶⁹ Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant, American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 172.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 172.

on the government.”⁷² In the era of Enlightenment thinking, the view that religion and morals would continue to influence the civic virtue of the people was simply taken for granted. Thus, religion’s place in the emerging constitutional scheme would be to ease the profound tension between the competing political philosophies.

Without belaboring this point, a remark by John Adams shows to what degree the founders had crossed their fingers and hoped for the best: “We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”⁷³

The Federalist/Anti-Federalist debates of 1788-89 bring these two competing philosophies into sharp focus. Of particular interest are the discussions about the proposed Constitution’s requirement for the separation of powers and unity in the executive.

To prevent the dangerous consolidation of powers within a single branch of government, Publius argues for unleashing “self love” to serve as a “sentinel over public rights.” By structuring a system in which “ambition must be made to counter ambition,” the Federalist argument went, no one branch could gain the upper hand. In similar fashion, self-interest would serve to preserve liberty in the broader society by controlling the “mischief of faction.”⁷⁴

Generally conservative, agrarian and nonaristocratic, Anti-Federalists rejected the notion that self-interest could supply the “defect of better motives.” As Centeniel writes:

⁷² The main argument of Federalist 51. Jacob E. Cooke, ed., *The Federalist*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p. 349.

⁷³ Bellah, p. 181.

⁷⁴ Cooke, p. 349.

“Suppose a government could be formed and supported on such principles, would it answer the great purposes of civil society; if the administrators of every government are actuated by views of private interest and ambition, how is the welfare and happiness of the community to be the result of such jarring adverse interests?”⁷⁵

Instead of founding the new government on self-interest, the Anti-Federalists placed greater faith in civic virtue, as informed by religious faith. According to Storing, they would have been sympathetic with “an anonymous Virginian who urged that steps be taken to revitalize religion:”

“Whatever influence speculative vanity may ascribe to the indefinite principle termed honor, or political refinement, to an artful collusion of interest, sound reason as well as experience proves that a due sense of responsibility to the Deity, as the author of these moral laws, an observance of which constitutes the happiness and welfare of societies as well as individuals, is the mean most likely to give a right direction to the conduct of mankind.”⁷⁶

While some likely favored government support for organized religion (namely Protestantism), the more general view was that the “consolidating Constitution threatened the healthy religious situation as it then existed.” Given the already pluralistic nature of America’s religious polity, consolidation under a secular Constitution would substitute “for religion some other foundation of political morality—which the Anti-Federalists foresaw would be an aggregate of selfish interests held together by force.”⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Herbert J. Storing, ed., *The Anti-Federalists*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) p. 14.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Storing, *What the Anti-Federalists Were For*, p. 23.

The view that the “Constitution had turned away from religion as the foundation of civil institutions” was reinforced by the proposed Constitution’s lack of religious test for officeholders.⁷⁸ Nostalgia for such a requirement dated back to the Puritan era of John Winthrop’s “city set upon a hill.” For a brief moment in American history, there was little or no tension between the City of God and the City of Man. Religious faith was integrated with public life to such an extent that only upstanding church members—who had experienced conversion—could participate in the body politic. That lasted for 30 years; the 1662 adoption of the “half-way covenant,” which allowed the unconverted political participation, marked the end of religious hegemony and the beginning of civil religion.⁷⁹

The issue of self-love surfaced again in the Constitution’s requirement for unity in the executive. In Federalist 70, Publius states that a vigorous executive is necessary for the protection against foreign attacks, the steady administration of laws, security of liberty against faction and the protection of property. These benefits cannot be assured, he argues, by a plural executive—however vigorous. This is because any jealousy or strife among the members of the executive council would bring out opposition, which is “the indispensable duty of self-love,” and “sacrifice the greater interests of society to vanity.”⁸⁰

Put off by the monarchical implications of a single executive, Anti-Federalists railed against the proposal. Finding the idea of a single executive completely at odds with republicanism, George Mason sought to “trample upon this boasted superiority” by stating that a vigorous executive could not ensure an effective government. Instead what

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Michael Scott Horton, *Made in America, The Shaping of Modern American Evangelicalism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), p. 20.

⁸⁰ Cooke, p. 475.

was necessary was “the love, the affection, the attachment of the citizens to their laws, to their freedom and to their country.”⁸¹

The sharp tenor of the discussions around these two issues suggest that from the beginning the nation has been in conflict over how to think about civic and religious norms and how to build them into a coherent theory of government. According to McSwite, the Federalists perceived government’s role as directing the energies of an “implacably self-interested human nature” toward the end of achieving economic prosperity. Anti-Federalists, on the other hand, visualized government as an integrated whole and as “close to the people.” Rather than relying on self-interest to regulate behavior, they saw the “regulatory power of human relationship as coming from community rather than from formal institutions. Only in this way could the American polity survive as a “moral community.” Far from “seating” that community in the national capital, the Anti-Federalist would locate “the seat of that community” in “hearts of the people.”⁸²

For all their pacific eloquence, the Anti-Federalists lost the argument. The newly ratified Constitution, with its emphasis on national consolidation and taxation, minimal representation and self-interest, put the nation on the path toward economic independence. While it is difficult to predict the likely pathologies that might have stemmed from the adoption of the Anti-Federalist view of the world, the collateral damage arising from the Federalist program was littered over the subsequent century. According to McSwite, “The American constitution was altered by the American Constitution.”⁸³

⁸¹ John A. Rohr, *To Run a Constitution*, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1986), p. 48.

⁸² McSwite, p. 80-3.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

Before turning to that period, however, it may be useful to tie down a few “ends” with regard to modern public administration. More sanguine than most “legitimacy theorists,” Rohr sees a silver lining in the Federalist legacy. If we are stuck with a single executive, he argues, then at least we have a large—and largely representative—cadre of public servants who mediate the will of that executive. Bringing their civic virtue to bear, “they may well serve as a corrective against the likely excesses of a single executive prone to carry out his constitutional powers in a haughty or arrogant manner that offends republican principle.”⁸⁴ In other words, if we cannot retreat to an Anti-Federalist constitutional structure that relies on the civic virtue of ordinary citizens, then the next best thing may be to ensure that the federal bureaucracy is public-spirited and endowed with civic virtue.

A Wounded Faith

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to examine the political and social history of the entire 19th century under the lens of the Federalist legacy. However, a few comments are in order to set the stage for what I term the return of public benevolence on the American scene. As McSwite points out, the Anti-Federalist or republican “idea” simply did not vanish after 1789; rather it “persisted as a counter-subtheme” to Constitutional government.”⁸⁵

Stephen Skowronek has shown that changes in the political and institutional arrangements in the late 19th century laid the groundwork for the state-building that was soon to dominate the early 20th century.⁸⁶ Of particular interest, as it relates to benevolence, is the profound transformation occurring in the Protestant churches.

⁸⁴ Rohr, p.

⁸⁵ McSwite, p. 98.

⁸⁶ Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Following the Civil War, the churches were preoccupied with adjusting to denominational life painfully split along racial and geographic lines. Northern churches were predictably triumphalist and self-righteous, while their southern brethren struggled to accept the cruel blow of losing the war. Facing the daunting task of ministering to “thousands in abject poverty,” the southern Protestants had the more difficult adjustment:

“They had seen their cause to be a moral one, charted by Providence himself. God had led them to slavery as a peculiar institution, to secession as a policy and to battle as a means for defense of both. Now they had been defeated. Had they been wrong? Had God failed them, or had they failed him? There were varieties of answers to these questions, but few answers led to the kind of soul searching out of which new concord with the North, including with northern Protestants, could have come.”⁸⁷

In evangelical tradition, many southern Protestants interpreted their defeat in terms of the personal morality of individuals—that God had judged them for bad “manners” rather than for the egregious injustices wrought by slavery. This view, combined with the hard blow to southern pride and the “southern way of life,” ensured that there was little or no integration of black and white Protestants in the south. Matters weren’t helped by northern churches sending missionaries southward to evangelize both black and white. This “spiritual imperialism” served to extend the bellicose feelings and prevented denominations from reconciling their differences in a spirit of love. Southern Baptists never reconciled with their northern brethren; it would take Methodists and Presbyterians until the mid-1900s to repair the great breaches in their denominations.

⁸⁷ Marty, p. 134.

According to Marty, this “failure to mend and heal . . . shaped the destiny of Protestantism for the ensuing century.” In contrast to the Protestantism’s 200-year history of building a “righteous empire” in America, “Reconstruction saw the setting up of permanent problems for any who had ever dreamed of a continuing single dominion for Christ in the hands of the Protestants.⁸⁸

Reeling from the material and physical dislocations of the war, denominations also began to experience significant theological differences along their geographic fault lines. The economic hardships, poverty, discouragement and shame felt in the South led to a dismal theological outlook known as premillennialism. According to this view, which Marty claims would have been “heretical” to their Puritan forebears, the churches were powerless in their efforts to improve or change society—that “the only substantial change in history” would occur after Christ returned to earth to usher in a 1000-year reign of peace and justice, known as the millennium.⁸⁹ This led to a more or less singular focus on the life to come, rather than on remedying present ills or even struggling against them.

In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the premillennialist view is most-clearly associated with the loyal, Christianly Tom. Dragging Tom and his other new charges behind him, the disgusting “bullet head” slave driver known as Simon Legree pulls at a flask and demands levity:

“I say, you!” he said, as he turned back and caught a glance at the dispirited faces behind him. “Strike up a song, boys—come!”

The men looked at each other, and the “come” was repeated, with a smart crack of the whip which the driver carried in his hands. Tom began a Methodist hymn—

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 138.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 256.

*Jerusalem, my happy home,
Name ever dear to me!
When shall my sorrows have an end,
Thy joys when shall—*

*“Shut up, you black cuss!” roared Legree; “did ye think I wanted any o’ yer
infernal old Methodism? I say, tune up, now something real rowdy—quick.”⁹⁰*

The theological contrast could not have been greater in the North. There, reveling in their “moral victory” over the South, the northern Protestants were “still free to push the post-millennial line of the evangelical empire and “talk about the ways the American environment could be transformed into the kingdom of God.”⁹¹ While this view would eventually inspire great public works in the decades to come, in the triumphal aftermath of Reconstruction, post-millennialism fed a deep sense of complacency and defense of the status quo. As Marty notes, “while the Protestant clerics still continued to denounce individuals faults of people in and around their congregations, they were even more at ease with general societal trends in the late 1870s than their grandfathers had been in the 1830s.”⁹²

Enter the excesses of the gilded age. As the nation gained economic power, ordinary Americans watched with awe as the congregation of interests led to an entirely new and threatening business entity: the corporation. Riches were to be had and fortunes made along the miles and miles of railroads, fueling flagrant corruption in and between government and industry and giving rise to a class of millionaires with an ostentatiousness never witnessed before.

⁹⁰ Stowe, p. 367.

⁹¹ Marty, p. 139.

⁹² Ibid., p. 143.

At the same time, northern cities swelled to the breaking point with tens of millions of new immigrants and emancipated slaves seeking work. In 1850, only 7 cities with more than one hundred thousand residents, but by 1900 six cities had topped one-half million. For Americans raised on country virtue, bucolic vistas and the myth of limitless possibilities, the resulting amassing of “humanity struggling to breathe free” was both overwhelming and terrifying. While the conditions might not have differed from those in European cities, they ran hard against America’s frontier mentality and “profligacy with space.” The miserable life of the tenements teeming with filth and disease only confirmed what Jefferson had said a century before: “I view great cities as a pestilence of the morals, the health, the liberties of man.” No small wonder, as Witold Rybczynski points out, that the New World city became “the setting for individual pursuits rather than communal activities.” To get away from the coarseness of city life, genteel America retreated to “the private comforts and refinement of their individual homes.”⁹³

Flush with cheap labor, industrialization continued feverishly, drawing women and children into its clasp. *City Ballads*, a collection of poems published in 1885, captures the essence of the new American city:

*Listen! The factory wall
Sends out its morning call.
Hear the machinery’s din;
Look at the folks within.
Child with a poor, pale face;
Woman with hurried grace;
Man with the look half wise;
Girl with the handsome eyes.*

⁹³ Witold Rybczynski, *City Life: Urban Expectations in a New World* (New York: Scribner, 1995), p. 78.

How the long spindles whirl!

How the rich webs unfurl!...

Why are you toiling so?

Where do your wages go?

A goodly part to the owners, whoever they may be:

A little part to the living of those I love and me;

And all the rest to the cities that gem the river and sea.⁹⁴

Against this backdrop operated a complex of Protestant churches, uncritically accepting the profound social changes taking place all around them. According to Marty, “they defended personal property, endorsed individual rights to acquire wealth, congratulated those who aspired and achieved, and enlarged America’s sense of mission and destiny in the world.” Not surprisingly, church property holdings grew from \$171 million to \$354 million between 1860 and 1870.⁹⁵

Philosophically the churches found themselves as strange bedfellows with Social Darwinists. While they had rejected the biological aspects of evolutionary theory, their Calvinist views on election and predestination and the whole-hearted embrace of the Protestant work ethic aligned closely with the Spencerian notions of natural selection and the survival of the fittest. The connection ran as follows:

“The rich could be charitable and the poor could do much more to lift themselves by their bootstraps if the only followed the gospel which taught that wealth was a sign of divine approval. The state was not to interfere or regulate in any way. Men were not equal nor were they to have equality. God had predestined inequality, although he continued to hold the poor responsible for the sins which

⁹⁴ Will Carleton, *City Ballads*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1885), p. 33.

led them to poverty, even as he called the rich to accountability for the way they were to disburse their wealth.”⁹⁶

Even if the churches could comfort themselves that “God hath ordained it so,” beneath the complacent and affluent surface, there was considerable distress. To assist their church members in finding meaning and purpose amid the complexities of modern living, ministers played the role of “symbol transformers,” helping their congregations “adapt to profound changes without upsetting them.”⁹⁷ Nostalgia for small-town life was a key way of connecting increasingly urban church-goers with a bygone tradition:

*And then the churches—elegant to view—
An independent fortune in each pew.
One window-pane in one big church that’s here
Cost more than our old preacher made per year!
(A city pastor’s salary, I declare,
Would keep him all his life, with cash to spare,
A-preaching in that little house of wood,
Holding his hearers’ eyes in all he could,
With rolling meadows and green trees in view,
And fresh-complexioned streamlets wandering through.)*⁹⁸

Rise of the Social Gospel

As McSwite points out, the country during this period was reaping the harvest of the Federalist crop of ideas planted a century before. By constitutional design, the growing and unregulated industrial base was reshaping the American landscape and redefining

⁹⁵ Marty, p. 147.

⁹⁶ Marty, p. 149-50.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 148.

⁹⁸ Carleton, p. 33.

American mores and tastes. The rise of urban political machines and growing acrimonious partisanship had soured many Americans, creating a pervasive sense of disillusionment and pessimism. The presumed benevolence and civic virtue of the people was losing its grip on effective governance, and the nation's "fiery pulpits," which Tocqueville had concluded were "indispensable to the maintenance of republican institutions," were in no condition to help revive or replenish it.

The financial panic of 1877 and subsequent labor strikes in 1886 and 1894 helped shock the nation out of its dismal and lethargic mood. These "social volcanoes" were a particularly rude awakening for Protestants, who "had become increasingly attentive to those who could contribute the most money, but generally ignored the manner in which it had been obtained."⁹⁹ In addition to viewing class distinctions as inevitable, churches encouraged the workingman to submit to authority and look for rewards in the life to come. At bottom, churches opposed labor organization because of a fear of violence.

But the strikes—as well as rising concern about the "urban question"—seared enough consciences to stimulate a new movement within Protestantism known as Social Christianity.

The big names associated with the new movement—Washington Gladden, Richard Ely and Walter Rauschenbusch—were influenced by European theological and social thought and motivated by the "human damage they saw in the social order."¹⁰⁰ The answer, they believed, was to rely on the principles of the historical Jesus as guides for both individual and corporate life. Because of the emphasis on the teachings of Jesus, the bias toward the poor they inspired and the expectation of his coming Kingdom, the movement soon became known as the Social Gospel.

⁹⁹ Hector Leroy Cordova, "The Formation of the Social Gospel of Charles Monroe Sheldon, 1886-1919," A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the Department of History, San Jose State College, 1967, p. 23.

¹⁰⁰ Marty, p. 181.

Far from monolithic, the Social Gospel represented a broad stream of religious movements, ranging from an evangelical wing to Christian Socialism. Linked more by action than belief, the adherents expressed general confidence in human goodness and the inevitable march of progress. Also, the new awareness that sin was not limited to the individual—but that systems could likewise exhibit evil—“did much to prepare Americans who had been reared in an individualistic ethos for the tensions and conflicts of the twentieth century.”¹⁰¹

The movement’s theological underpinnings were related to the “new theology,” which by the late 1880s Andover and other seminaries had begun to espouse. According to Robert Handy, Andover did not go so far as to break with Reformation creeds but wanted a real-time and place religion that dealt “more with beings than with abstractions, more with persons, rather than things or words, and more with actual processes than a priori assumptions.”¹⁰² Theologically the shift was seismic, moving the locus of the faith away from the transcendence of God the Father toward the immanence of Jesus the Son.

Jesus, himself, underwent a transformation during this period. Gone was his soft, otherworldly translucence bestowed on him during the Victorian era. In its place were “dark hair and eyes, a well-developed physique and rough, calloused hands.” In short, Jesus the carpenter became Jesus the common laborer who worked with his hands. He was a “man’s man.”¹⁰³

The more masculine Jesus—with bronze arms strong for service—helped legitimate the notion that Christian service was no longer simply the purview of women and relegated to the home. According to Susan Curtis:

¹⁰¹ Robert T. Handy, ed., *The Social Gospel in America, 1870-1920*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 3.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

“Jesus affirmed the social ideal; he relieved the unrealistic burdens of individual success and salvation; but he was not effeminate... This image of Jesus helped ease social gospeler’s fears of effeminacy as they engaged in social reform that addressed the domestic needs of their parishioners through collective programs that embodied the ideals of service, sacrifice and love.”¹⁰⁴

Moral Burden of Progressivism

If the social gospel movement represented a confluence of strands of religious fervency, then its intersection with the political movements of the day—first Populism and later Progressivism—likewise resembled a confluence of turbulent currents. As Curtis points out, the transformation of American politics from the corrupt “machine” to the positive state was enmeshed in the broader social changes afoot around the turn of the century “and . . . was tied securely to the Social Gospel.”¹⁰⁵ What emerged out the rich cultural delta was a politics of morality, whose chief heroes were T.R. Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson—both of whom reportedly consulted with Rauschenbusch in developing their social agendas. It was Rauschenbusch’s prayer that God would “help make the welfare of all the supreme law of the land, so that our commonwealth may be built strong and secure on the love of its citizens.”¹⁰⁶

The combination of the new-found zeal for social service and scientific breakthroughs in the physical world fueled a rising interest in social science. Not surprisingly, churches eagerly welcomed the new field. For example, social gospeler Richard Ely was also the “leading spirit” in the American Economics Association. At the association’s first meeting in 1885, he called on the church as “chief of the social forces of this country” to

¹⁰³ Susan Curtis, *A Consuming Faith*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 81.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

¹⁰⁶ Ronald C. White, Jr. and C. Howard Hopkins, *The Social Gospel, Religion and Reform in Changing America*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976), p. 166.

“join in the revolt against the laissez-faire theory, the investigation of the problems of social science and the solution of a vast number of social problems...”¹⁰⁷ Surveys and social science research were enthusiastically embraced by the churches, causing one historian to state that social science and the Social Gospel “walked hand in hand” for 30 years.¹⁰⁸ According to Lewy: “The introduction of social sciences and the idea of social justice owe a decisive debt to the Christian conception of love. . .Sensitivity to the suffering of others has been nourished by obedience to the imperative of self-sacrificing love taught by Jesus.”¹⁰⁹

Public administration, it would seem, also owes a debt to social Christianity. Citing Waldo, Lane observes that “the genius of traditional American public administration developed *in spite* of American individualism. It has ancient and honorable roots in those aspects of history and tradition that express and inculcate values of community, citizenship, leadership, virtue, duty, participation in civic affairs and common interest.”¹¹⁰

Love Lost

Paradoxically, the success of the new heart-felt orientation of government contributed to its own demise. The politics of morality made possible a number of Progressive-era reforms, particularly in the areas of public health and sanitation, which had previously administered by women’s benevolent societies. As Stivers has shown, however, the transfer of social services from private to public duty and from the feminine to the masculine realm set the stage for the eventual sterilization of what had been a labor of love. Rationalization, professionalization and bureaucratization—each masculine in the

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 129.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 130.

¹⁰⁹ Lewy, p. 11.

¹¹⁰ Lane, p. 34.

elevation of reason, control and a search for order—led to a repression of self, of feeling and of a feminine way of knowing.¹¹¹

The churches themselves had unknowingly complied in the secularization of their movement. As Curtis notes, by the early 1900s,

“Protestant churches had given up many social functions to the state. They had lost cultural authority in their communities. They had become but one interest among many in the associative state. Americans looked to experts in the state and in the marketplace for well being, protection and purpose. Science explained life and death, and secular agencies of the state harnessed the knowledge of science to become “promoters of the good life.”¹¹²

Faction within Protestantism weakened the movement still further. The liberal/fundamentalist divide, somewhat assuaged during the reform era, became more acute and bitter—particularly after the creation of the Federal Council of Churches in 1908. As liberal Protestants embraced evolutionary theories and the implicit belief that “all was unfolding as it should,” theirs became a “Protestantism without protest.” At the same time, the loss of a sense of the sacred led to a “protest without Protestantism” in the form of utopianism, socialism and Marxism. By about 1920, the crusading love of the social gospel movement had dissolved into simply a crusade, becoming more social than gospel, more secular than sacred. Jesus was transformed again—from the strong and loving laborer into a deity of Progress.

The blending and bending of the movement within the larger stream of Progressivism, combined with the great sense of disillusionment that accompanied World War I, signaled the formal end of the social gospel movement. However, as several are quick to

¹¹¹ Stivers, *Gender Images*, p. 41.

point out, the idea that churches have a social responsibility with regard to social and economic issues has continued to reverberate through the decades; its most recent incarnation is perhaps the civil rights movement. Similarly, the idea that government has a social and moral responsibility reappeared in the form of New Deal and Great Society programs.

Recent disappointment with these well intentioned efforts and programs appears to have sanctioned a retreat to personal piety and therapeutic faith on the part of the churches, and to public choice theory on the part of business and government. Unfortunately, the blame has been misplaced. The problem was not that government took on a social role, but that it grossly underestimated the importance of faith, love and the feminine way of knowing. In forsaking its religious and moral heart for efficiency and expertise, a “tin man” of public service is all that remains.

Summary

This chapter has explored the major themes of the moral history of the first century of public administration, looking at the period through the lens of “politically significant love” or benevolence. From the nation’s founding, religion was thought to play a critical role in assuaging the incommensurable elements of a republic based on civic virtue and a constitutional order based on self-interest. From Reconstruction through the Gilded Age, however, the “salt and light” influence of Protestant churches waned as the northern church retreated into a strange blend of personal piety and Social Darwinism as a way of coping with the social convulsions of the new urban landscape. The eventual emergence of the Social Gospel—and a revived sense of public responsibility on the part of the churches—did much to assuage the rising tensions in national life. It inspired Progressive-era reforms as well as the young field of social science. The rise of public administration as a self-conscious field was not far behind.

¹¹² Curtis, p. 145.

The next chapter focuses on a representative character of the social gospel era: Charles M. Sheldon. Not only was Sheldon immensely successful in propagandizing the ideals of the new era, he collapsed the false dichotomy between public and private, being and doing and mind and heart in his role as citizen administrator.

Chapter 5 - Charles M. Sheldon: Citizen Administrator

I had to chuckle. The receptionist at the economy motel on the other end of the long-distance call was emphatic in an uncomplicated midwestern way: “You want to do some research in Topeka? Then you should stay here. We’re right near the Historical Society.”

“Good. Are you also near the State Capitol or Central Congregational Church?”

“No, but this is the best part of town,” she offered. “All the strip malls are here.”

And so began my journey to Topeka, capital of the 34th state and flat as cornbread. The “Golden City” sports sunflowers on every state-maintained road—and, like the outskirts of any other town—its share of franchised fast food, low-cost motels and, well, strip malls.

Several weeks later, there I was: paying \$39.95 for a room with a view of Interstate 70, holed up in archives by day, and wandering the mall by night. I took my meals in solitude, going from one all-too-familiar eatery to another. But I was in good company. Even on Sunday in their church best, Topekans swarmed the restaurants, filling smoking sections and ordering drinks. Was I really in the dry state “surrounded by a sea of whiskey” where a century ago grandmotherly Carrie Nation smashed bottles with her hatchet and yanked a cigar out of man’s mouth while riding a street car? And where a young minister handy with a pen never missed an opportunity to decry intemperance and the desecration of the Sabbath?

Back then, in the words of Charles M. Sheldon:

“The liquor men worked in large part through so-called drug stores, many of which were nothing but saloons in disguise. The state law made it obligatory on the part of the druggist to secure from a customer a signed statement of the disease for which he needed a bottle of liquor, and he was supposed to take it out of the store. . . .The whole thing was a farce. While conditions in Topeka were a particular disgrace because it was the capital, and cited as an example of lawlessness by every other town over the state, I asked one of my church officials to go with me to secure evidence and see if our county officials would take any action.

“We started at the head of our main business street...and went down on both sides, buying drinks by the bottle from the drug stores that sold it under the state law for sickness. At no place were we asked to sign any probate court statements. We went clear down to the river buying beer, whisky, wine as freely as we might have bought toothbrushes or hair oil, until we had a big basket full. I carried this basket home and stored it in my cellar and the following Sunday took it into the pulpit and told my people how it was purchased. The papers, of course, took the matter up and the county attorney suddenly “got busy,” and brought a number of cases before the district court.”¹¹³

Born of Puritan stock in Wellsville, NY in 1857, Charles Monroe Sheldon was one of five children of Stewart and Sarah Sheldon. His father was a Presbyterian-trained Congregational minister, who moved the family every several years to different church parishes. Charles spent the better part of his childhood in the Dakota territory, where his

¹¹³ Charles M. Sheldon, “When Carrie Nation Came to Kansas,” *The Christian Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1, Jan, 4, 1930.

father served as the first missionary home superintendent, founding one hundred churches in 10 years.¹¹⁴

Life on the 160-acre homestead was a homey blend of survival and salvation. Like no where else, folk on the American frontier “knew all too well that their temporal salvation was in their own hands.”¹¹⁵ Young Sheldon seemed to revel in the daily toil—hard physical work that instilled in him a great sense of dignity and pride. From this hardy childhood would come great sympathy for the labor cause later in life.

The practical concerns of frontier life were met with rolled-up sleeves and daily family Bible-reading and prayer. As Sheldon would later recall, “Each morning the family would sit together in the “parlor” of the log cabin and read aloud, each member of the family old enough to participate taking two verses in turn.”¹¹⁶ In this way, young Sheldon was to hear the entire Bible read aloud five or six times before he was a young man.

In his late teens, Sheldon made an unemotional profession of faith at the church of his uncle, Joseph Ward, “who was fearless in his attack on the liquor trade” and a great hero to Charles. Following his conversion, he reported that he began “to feel strangely happy. It [seemed] to me that a great burden [had] been rolled off my back.”¹¹⁷ His change of heart resulted in a “daily avoidance of anything possibly offensive to Christian practices.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Timothy Miller, *Following In His Steps, A Biography of Charles M. Sheldon*, (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), p. 6.

¹¹⁵ Horton, p. 26.

¹¹⁶ Miller, p. 7.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8, 9.

¹¹⁸ Hector Leroy Cordova, “The Formation of the Social Gospel of Charles Monroe Sheldon, 1886-1919,” A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the Department of History, San Jose State College, 1967, p. 54.

In 1877 Sheldon was sent back east to attend Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. He then attended Brown University, and following graduation entered the strictly orthodox Andover Theological Seminary. During his studies there, the seminary became embroiled in controversy about the “new theology”—a progressive orthodoxy that challenged Calvinist notions of the total depravity of man and divine election. The more liberal view espoused modern biblical criticism, an optimistic appraisal of human nature and the immanence of God in human affairs.¹¹⁹

It is unclear how much an impact the emerging Christocentric theology had on Sheldon. His writings lack direct mention of theological issues encountered at Andover—but nearly all his sermons and books brim with exigencies to “do as Jesus would do,” suggesting he had internalized many of liberalism’s claims. On the other hand, theological apathy was to characterize his entire life. Sheldon was later to say that “action was all, and theorizing a rather useless and objectionable—what with all the reform the world stood in need of—waste of valuable time.”¹²⁰ He also remarked that the Golden Rule to love God and neighbor with heart, soul and strength was enough to keep every Christian busy without adding theological speculation and discussion. To Sheldon, Christ was not a “statesman of details—but of large principles.”¹²¹

In this way, Sheldon seemed comfortable with seemingly incommensurable truths. According to Cordova, his religious philosophy was a “syncretic fusion of both evangelical and social elements . . . a flexible and adaptive philosophical outline upon which Sheldon could expand as conditions warranted. He never felt it necessary to explain this fusion of seemingly opposite elements. . . He merely accepted both as pragmatically necessary for the salvation of man and society. This characteristic—his religious pragmatism—was both a source of praise and criticism, because he focused on

¹¹⁹ Miller, p. 14.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

¹²¹ Sermon by Charles Sheldon, Feb. 2, 1890.

the practical effects of religion rather than on a logical, well articulated and detailed theology.”¹²²

Sheldon’s unique brand of religious pragmatism extended to every aspect of his ministerial career, starting at a small Congregational church in Waterbury, New York to his long tenure as the first minister of the Central Congregational Church in Topeka, Kansas.

In Waterbury, Sheldon had limited success bringing his reformist ideas to the small mountainous parish. To get better acquainted with the members of his congregation during his first year, he asked to live with each family for a week, a practice he called “boarding around.” Beginning on Sunday, he would spend the day with the family, returning to his hotel at night. The rest of the week, he would take lunch and dinner with the family and stay for the evening. In all, he boarded with 45 families of his 175-member church. He also was remembered for using a chalkboard to illustrate sermon points, having his sermons printed up for the benefit of his hearing-impaired members, opposing the ownership of church pews and planting a vegetable garden on church property and selling the produce.

But innovation and service extended beyond the parish door. In the town of Waterbury, Sheldon began a reading club for youth that attracted over 200 participants and led to the creation of a town library. He also took up a collection for a town hearse and helped improve the quality of the town drinking water. One winter, after two dozen citizens had died of typhoid, Sheldon worked with a young doctor to convince the town fathers to relocate the water wells away from the pigpens. Further, he took it upon himself to solve the vexing problem of street dust. According to Miller:

¹²² Cordova, p. 55.

“Sheldon, on an earlier walk of inspection around the village, had discovered a spring on a hillside above the town and cleverly rigged up a pipe which took the water to a tank—the remains of a cider press—in the hayloft of a barn near the main street. Then he secured another cider tank, had it mounted on a lumber wagon, and hired an elderly man to drive it around. Up and down Main Street went the sprinkler all summer, and the dust vanished. Sheldon was the man of the hour for fastidious housekeepers.”¹²³

Although he was well-regarded by church members, Sheldon’s impatience with the tradition-bound parish made him restless to move on. According to Miller, “for someone who wanted to change the world, Waterbury wasn’t the place to be. The man of action was ready to go, and part of that going was leading a lively, young church.”¹²⁴ After two years, Sheldon resigned his post and accepted a call to become the first minister of the Central Congregational Church of Topeka.

The new church was a mission parish, 60-strong and meeting above a store and meat market. Sheldon was paid a salary of \$1000 the first year, low even for those days, and earned not much more than that for the remainder of his 50 years at Central Congregational. Shortly after he arrived, the church relocated to its present location, and on June 23, 1889, Sheldon preached his first sermon in the new building. Hereafter Sheldon announced that this church would preach:

“a Christ for the common people. A Christ who belongs to the rich and to the poor, the ignorant and the learned, the old and the young, the good and the bad. A Christ who knows no sect or age, whose religion does not consist alone in cushioned seats, and comfortable surroundings, or culture, or fine singing or respectable orders of Sunday services, but a Christ who bids us all recognize the

¹²³ Miller, p. 17.

Brotherhood of the race, who bids throw open this room to all...I cannot help feeling that God has, through the power of his dear son, great things in store for us.”¹²⁵

I pushed open the door of my motel room and a swirl of snow rushed inside. Already several inches covered the ground, the pool and the satellite dish just off my second-floor balcony. Not a good sign. With barely enough time to make the 10 am service in fair weather, I had no idea how to get from the “good part” of Topeka to the old church—wherever it was.

I went downstairs to talk to the receptionist. “The church is somewhere on Buchanan,” I said helpfully, as she pored over the city map.

“Oh, here it is,” she said. “Take a right on 10th and go east until you hit the Presidents’ streets. It’s around there somewhere.”

Central Congregational was around there somewhere—and thanks to a gas station attendant, I found it. The large church brooded on a quiet street of modest, well-kept homes. I was a little worried about finding a place to park, but shouldn’t have been. There was diagonal parking right in front of the church. I pulled in, ran up the icy steps and got inside just ahead of the acolyte and choir.

“Don’t I know you?” said the woman leading me past 15 or so empty rows to a seat near the front.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 23.

“I don’t think so,” I whispered. “I’m from Virginia.”

The church was cavernous and adorned with rich wood paneling and stained glass. Standing in the nave was a gigantic wooden cross with a pale purple light emanating from behind. A large balcony wrapped around three sides of the church and there were rows of extra seats in the right transept. The pews in the left transept had been removed, the area given over to showcases and bookcases—a Sheldon “library” evidently. The church could easily seat 500, but only 50 or so worshippers had come out. It was the snow, the minister later told me.

“And what would Jesus do?” she asked the group of five children whom she had coaxed forward for the children’s talk. In Sunday School earlier that morning they had fashioned simple bracelets with the letters WWJD?, a motto that may have started at this pulpit but now was sweeping youth groups around the country. (The night before, while supping at the “food court” of the mall, I had been served by a pimply teenager wearing a WWJD necklace, one of 15 million sold in the past year.)

“Sean,” she asked the older boy, “if you had an enemy at school, what would Jesus want you to do?”

The voice cracked, but the answer was straight out of the Beatitudes. “Love your enemy,” he said.

The answer was met with approval.

The sermon for grown-ups was about Jesus’ first recorded miracle at the wedding feast in Cana. In her opening remarks, Rev. Timpany said, “I always used to tell my Baptist

grandfather that Jesus could not have forbidden drinking because he turned the water into wine.”

I almost thought I could hear Carrie Nation enter the church and begin swinging.

After the service, I, the visitor the storm had blown in, was warmly greeted. So interested were they in seeing more attention paid to their famous founding pastor that they offered to let me stay in the church after it had been “alarmed” to peruse their collection of Sheldon memorabilia. Then they proudly showed me the rest of the church. The large gymnasium had been leased by the town for a child care center. Around the corner from that was a large parlor—recently redecorated they informed me—and an airy chapel-sized sanctuary. Another huge wing housed classrooms and offices. Originally it had served as a kindergarten and library for the black residents of nearby Tennesseetown, a reconstruction-era shanty town on the north side of the church.

But today everyone in the cavernous church was white. Must have been the snow.

“I was amazed by the topic of your children’s sermon,” I told Rev. Timpany over a cup of tea after the tour. “Do you always refer to the legacy of Charles Sheldon in your sermons, or did I just get lucky?”

“Isn’t it something?” said the woman who had seated me earlier. “We can’t get over the WWJD phenomenon.”

Rev. Timpany’s husband shrugged. “If only we could rescue it from the fundamentalists.”

As in Waterbury, Sheldon's first task upon arrival in Topeka was to get to know people. But he didn't stop with his congregation. Sheldon wanted to know the town, and he started at the bottom rung.

In 1890, during his second winter in Topeka, Sheldon came face to face with the defining issue for the social gospel movement: unemployment and labor unrest. As a result of the cataclysmic shifts taking place in the new industrial economy, thousands of men were out of work all around the country. The old puritanical view that each was responsible for his own lot and that failure to work was a sign of moral depravity was under siege. The world of work had forever changed, and the preachers of the Social Gospel were the first to realize it.

But Sheldon needed more information before taking action. Donning old clothes, he spent a week vainly searching for work.

“He walked into every store (except for tobacco shops and theaters, of whose business he disapproved). . . and was turned down at every door. For four and a half days he kept up the routine, unrecognized by anyone. Finally, his empathy with unemployed at its height, he was a crew shoveling snow from the Santa Fe railroad tracks, and asked the foreman if he could help them without being paid. The bemused foreman agreed; Sheldon borrowed a shovel from a nearby coal yard and went to work. The simple joy of working was so great that he went on with it for half a day. The next morning . . . the manager offered him a job unloading a car of coal. Sheldon went at the job with a vengeance, finishing it before noon and earning 50 cents.”¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 25.

The experience moved him deeply. The frontier-bred Sheldon preached eight sermons on the problem of unemployment, railing against “the horrible blunder and stupidity of our whole industrial system that does not work according to any well-established plan of a Brotherhood of men, but is driven by forces that revolved around some pagan rule of life called supply and demand.”¹²⁷ But more important than any railing he did against unfettered capitalism (he was never known for a coherent theory of political economy) was the conviction that complex social problems were beyond the control of any one individual and that collective action—as well as individual effort—was necessary to assuage or remedy them. For Protestant churches of that era, this recognition was a paradigmatic change of Kuhnian proportions.

Following this experience, Sheldon undertook a more systematic approach to investigating his new environs: he decided to spend one week with each of the eight key social groups he had identified in Topeka. These were: streetcar operators, college students, blacks, railroad workers, lawyers, physicians, businessmen and newspaper men. The experiment may have been novel for a churchman, but it reflected the era’s growing interest in data-gathering and sociological analysis. Even so, Sheldon was the first to decry what he called “abstract sociology,” which only produced theories or statistics. “The investigating of conditions,” he said, “is not sociology unless it helps the man.”¹²⁸

The experiment had a profound effect on his ministry and the future of Central Congregational. From helping integrate his congregation to confirming in him the desire to run a Christian daily newspaper, the experiment convinced him that the church had a significant role to play in righting the ills of society.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Charles M. Sheldon, *His Life Story*, p. 81.

¹²⁸ Miller, p. 24.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

Perhaps the most jarring—and enduring—of the eight encounters was with the black community at Tennesseetown, right up the street from the new church. So absorbing, in fact, that he extended his one-week stay to three.

Tennesseetown was a jurisdictional byproduct of the Compromise of 1877, which ended Reconstruction and produced a mass exodus of thousands of ex-slaves. Kansas, one of the newest free states, was a popular destination for the “exodusters” who made their way north and west. By 1880, some 40,000 former slaves had passed through Topeka. About 3,000 of them made a home there, accounting for 31 percent of the city’s population according to that year’s census. They settled on the southwestern edge of the city where land was cheap, an area that to this day is called Tennesseetown.¹³⁰

It was here—amid dilapidated houses and destitute poverty—that Sheldon took his course in practical sociology. He spent the first week trying to understand the reasons for the destitution and helping people find work; the second in visiting black schools; and the third conducting what were likely the first social experiments involving paired “testers.”

“First, he went with a well-dressed black man to a good restaurant to see if they would be served; they were. Then the two went separately into more restaurants, and the black man was served in both, perhaps to his surprise. Then they went to the YMCA, where the black man applied for membership, and that point they discovered the color line: the black man was not welcome.”¹³¹

According to the newspaper reports of the day, the trouble with Tennesseetown lay with the “incompetence of the settlers.” But after spending time in Tennesseetown, Sheldon

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 51.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 26.

had another response: racism and poverty. And he was the first white Topekan to say so.¹³²

In trying to get at root causes, Sheldon conducted an informal survey of 800 residents, dividing them into three groups based on the length of time they had lived in Tennesseetown. In this way he discovered the need for certain basic social services. He also counted at least 100 children between the ages of 3 and 7, all ripe for kindergarten—except that there wasn't one, for blacks at least.

So Sheldon created a kindergarten. He talked the owner of Tennesseetown's rollicking speakeasy and dancehall into leasing him the building for two years. Then he lined up private donations and young recruits from Central Church to help renovate and repair what was to become the first black kindergarten west of the Mississippi. It opened April 3, 1893. Despite some initial reserve on the part of the black families, the school was quickly accepted by the community; by 1897, 287 pupils had taken part in its art projects, field trips, music bands, gardening and cleanliness programs. Etched into the stone wall, "Come let us be with our children," became the motto for the innovative program.

Other activities in Tennesseetown included the creation of a PTA-like program and library, integrated Sunday School, community beautification programs and contests, and sewing classes for girls and basket weaving for boys. True to Sheldon's slogan that "every church should be working on one local problem, at least," and that "what we need is doing! doing! doing!"¹³³ individual members of Central Church provided free medical care, small interest-free loans, legal services, food distribution, help finding employment,

¹³² Ibid., p. 49.

¹³³ Charles M. Sheldon, *A Charles Sheldon Yearbook*, compiled by Charles Crane, 1909. Entry for July 12.

home visits and child care. Other white churches soon joined the effort, providing an “early, practical demonstration of social reform through ecumenical effort.”¹³⁴

In a letter dated May 16, 1892, he wrote: “Dear Brother, I hope you will make an effort to be present at our Thursday evening service to hear Mr. Russ and Chief of Police...on “neglected boys in and out of prison.” I want our church to do some practical work along this line, and I know we shall be blessed in so doing. Will you bring as many to the meeting as possible?”

“How he worked for those colored people,” recalled Edna Burkhardt, a long-time member of Central Church. “At the time, [people in Tennesseetown] weren’t really being taken care of, they were being ignored, but he was right on the job....The church has continued that kind of work through the years, and it has been taken up by the city.”

Commenting that “segregation is worse now than it was then,” Minus Gentry, who attended the kindergarten had fond memories of Sheldon. “Everybody loved him, everybody. I’m sure nobody ever resented him.”¹³⁵

Dying at the age of 87, Sheldon lived long enough to see the fruits his labor. Crime reportedly declined significantly during the 1890s. Tennesseetown has taken on a “prosperous look,” said one newspaper. “Where there was once a bare lawn of weeds, there is now a lawn of blue-grass with park in front. There is a general look of enterprise instead of dilapidation.”¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Miller, p. 65.

¹³⁵ Miller transcripts.

¹³⁶ Miller, p. 64.

The baskets were sold for a profit of ten cents—a popular vocational training program also later absorbed into the public school curriculum.¹³⁷ The kindergarten remained open until 1910, when it was absorbed into the public school system. Probably its most famous graduate was Elisha Scott, whom Sheldon later helped attend law school at the local university. Eventually a leading Topeka attorney, Scott along with his two sons argued many desegregation cases, culminating in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* before the Supreme Court.¹³⁸

As Miller concludes:

“Sheldon’s uplift of Tennesseetown still stands as a good, intelligent, balanced approach to community betterment. It didn’t just provide gifts, but seriously promoted self-help. It wasn’t just a palliative program, but an integrated mix of relief and educational endeavors, with a strong emphasis on helping people get jobs in a time and situation when they were hard to come by. The program certainly had its naïve moments and some relative weaknesses, but on the whole it was more coherent, and did a lot more good, than a great many more costly and elaborate programs do today.”¹³⁹

When he wasn’t bustling with activity, Sheldon was writing.

With little to do during long dark prairie nights, the young Sheldon took to reading—and from there began writing. Impressed by the sentimental Waverly novels of Sir Walter Scott, which “romantically depict the manners and hardships of the Scottish lower class,”

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 59.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 52.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 65.

Sheldon began composing stories.¹⁴⁰ Eventually one found its way into a Dakota newspaper, and by the time he was in college, Sheldon was a regular contributor to a Boston youth weekly magazine. Upon graduation from seminary, he was offered a job on the editorial staff of *The Outlook*, a New York religious and social journal. Although tempted, he turned it down and proceeded into the ministry.¹⁴¹

Sheldon continued to turn out articles, stories, poems and hymn lyrics. In 1891, in the early years of his pastorate in Topeka, he began spinning the first of 30 “sermon stories.” Beginning with *Robert Bruce*, and including the seventh in the series, the hugely popular *In His Steps*, the stories eventually all became novels, forming the “backbone of his literary work.”¹⁴² To inspire church members to love and good works and to attract them back for Sunday evening services, he would read the stories sequentially—one chapter a week—ending like a modern soap opera on a particularly suspenseful point in the plot. The plan worked; within three weeks he had packed the church on Sunday nights—and it stayed that way until his retirement in 1919.

Sheldon likened the serial sermons to Jesus’ parables, imparting important truths in memorable stories. While fiction was generally frowned upon by churchgoers of that era, because his stories emanated from the pulpit, he was able to attract a particularly large and appreciative audience. Over time, his sermon stories became a regular event, carefully timed to begin with the start of the fall college semester and ending just before exams.

With his proliferation of novels, Sheldon became the most well-known populizer of the social gospel movement. He was not the first to begin writing in this genre—Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Washington Gladden were a decade ahead of him—and many others,

¹⁴⁰ Cordova, p. 54.

¹⁴¹ Miller, p. 15.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 67.

including W. T. Stead, author of *If Christ Came of Chicago*, were contemporary social gospel propangandists. But Sheldon seemed to be able to capture popular imagination to a degree unmatched by other writers.

In each of his novels, his generally white middle-class characters come face to face with hypocrisy in themselves or in their churches, against the backdrop of a pathologic social environment. By reorienting their thinking around the commands of Jesus—and actually following through on them—characters achieve personal growth as they pursue social betterment. His novel, *Heart of the World: A Story of Christian Socialism* helped place him on the fringe of the Christian Socialism movement, although the actual reforms he proposed were much tamer than the ones his fictional characters were living out. Still, in 1910, he was asked to be the vice presidential candidate of the Socialist party. He declined.

Despite the enormous popularity of *In His Steps*, in particular, Sheldon's works have never received literary acclaim. They have been described variously as naïve, unrealistic, overly optimistic, “sentimental, theologically sloppy and literarily forgettable.”¹⁴³

Apparently, he was not too troubled by such critiques as his goal was “not to produce great literature but to prick consciences.”¹⁴⁴ And he did. Whatever else can be said about the social gospel novel, it displayed and probed the guilt felt by much of the middle class about their feeble or nonexistent response to the profound societal changes resulting from industrialization and urbanization.

Second to Tennesseetown, Sheldon's other well-known (but less enduring) experiment was to run a Christian daily newspaper successfully for one week. Journalistic integrity was close to his heart and he had complained enough about “yellow journalism” to cause one newspaper owner to take him on. As part of a well-pitched public relations

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 69.

campaign, the *Topeka Daily Capital* agreed to give him full reins of the paper for one week. He could do as he pleased—and the world would see once and for all if Christian principles could be applied to the pagan world of journalism and still turn a profit. The effort has been cited as the “best-publicized experiment of the entire social gospel era.”¹⁴⁵

In January 1900, the new owner of the *Capital* announced the unprecedented venture: for the week of March 13 later that year, the author of *In His Steps*, by then published in the millions, would edit the eight-page paper for one week. During the next three months, a blitz of new subscriptions poured in; brilliantly, Sheldon-adoring youth, members of the national ecumenical Christian Endeavor Society, were enlisted to sell subscriptions, keeping a fraction of the proceeds for their local chapters. As anticipated circulation mounted, extra presses in Chicago, New York and England were engaged. Compared to the *Capital*'s average circulation of around 11,000 in 1899, circulation during Sheldon week exceeded 360,000.¹⁴⁶

While low on content, Sheldon having forbidden sensational reporting, distasteful ads (or those whose claims could not be validated), prize-fight coverage and partisan news, the Christian daily showcased a tight code of journalistic ethics. Bylines were used and the masthead displayed every employee's name down to the janitor. Reporters were instructed to not press for an interview beyond a first refusal. Furthermore, they were obliged to obtain written permission to use an interview and show the subject the final article before going to press. Slang was out—as was reporting on theater. Crime was downplayed, the extra space devoted to moralizing about how the crime might have been prevented. Even the society page took a beating when a reporter was sent out to investigate how society matrons frittered away money in trivial afternoon pursuits.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 96.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁴⁶ Miller, p. 125.

While successful by some measures, the experiment—not surprisingly—was derided in the secular press. His greatest support came from fellow-gospeler, Washington Gladden, who praised Sheldon for downplaying “gossip and rumor and scandal and the disgusting details of vice and crime...there are thousands of bring and beautiful things which would be the best kind of news if the reporters were trained to look for them.”¹⁴⁷

Following his retirement from Central Church, Sheldon was editor-in-chief of *The Christian Herald* from 1920-1925. While his editorials echoed similar themes as his sermon stories and novels, they—and other nonfiction pieces published throughout his adult life—highlight his specific viewpoints on pressing public issues of the day. He was outspoken in his support for the public ownership of utilities, truth-in-advertising, journalistic integrity, racial integration and reconciliation and good government. In addition to his decades-long fight against the “whiskey trade,” he vigorously opposed consumptive lifestyles, machine politics, child labor, anti-semitism and U.S. involvement in both World Wars. In a 1936 article entitled “If I Were President,” he called for the creation of a Secretary of Peace (“a woman, of course”), and for gradual unilateral disarmament made possible by “friendship with all nations.”

“If I were president...I would call the members of Congress together and say to them: Fellow citizens of this great and much troubled republic, disturbed with problems and distracted with party quarrels, what we as a people need is not more outward laws, but inward regeneration. If we should apply the teachings of the greatest Statesman that ever lived, and seek the kingdom of God first instead of money, pleasure and power, we would settle all economic problems. If we loved our enemies that would stop war. But it takes a higher form of courage to love your enemies than to shoot them. And greater statesmanship to apply the

¹⁴⁷ As quoted in Miller, p. 134-35.

teachings of the great Statesman to the affairs of state than to apply the party whip to the party voter.”

“If I were President...I would veto every war budget. We have signed a solemn treaty outlawing war and condemning it. I see no need for all this tremendous burden for “defense” purposes. No nation on earth is planning to attack us. If we create friendship with the world, as we can do, I see no reason for big army and navy forces.”¹⁴⁸

Unfortunately, within five years, Sheldon’s optimism would be proved wrong.

He was more prescient about community policing. In an article in *Colliers* in 1913, he states that the present police system is wrong because it is based on the wrong principle. In order to produce “ethical results,” policing should be seen as a redemptive process rather than a “detective and punitive agency.” In his largely honorary position as Topeka Police Commissioner, Sheldon noted that:

“The policeman . . . is in a position to be the greatest human “mixer” in the city. He is the one man in all the town who knows the inside life of all the people...He can touch life at its most intimate points of interest in the city. He is in a position to meet the people day and night, to see them from every point of vantage for getting acquainted with them first hand.”¹⁴⁹

According to Sheldon, this new policeman should be, at least half of the time, a woman. Other qualifications include: as thorough a preparation as for “the best minister, school teacher or doctor;” a passion to “save life, prevent crime, protect the honor of the city as if it were (as it is) his own hearth, and help the people in every way he possibly can;”

¹⁴⁸ Charles M. Sheldon, *The Christian Herald*, May 1936.

“perfectly competent to instruct youth or parenthood in th[e] tremendous subject...of sex hygiene;” family counselor; a constant student about the causes of vice, crime, poverty, depravity, injustice; friend and counselor of all people on his beat; and a man of devout religious life... “who says the Lord’s Prayer out of his heart.” Thanks to the “saving in vice expense, in graft, bribery, crime and general disorder,” the new policewoman would be paid more than currently.

A 1913 article in *The Independent* described how the new system would work: “We assign a man and a woman to each city block. That block with the people in it is the constant parish of those assigned to it. The missionary policemen are the big brother and big sister, counselor, friend, advisor, helper, savior of all the men and women who live on the block....”

Anticipating his secular critics, Sheldon replies:

“At this point the average city administration will probably want to know, with a sneer, if cities can be run like Sunday schools. It would be a good thing if they were. I know nothing that is more useful and morally economical than a well-organized Sunday School. When the modern city has reached as high a degree of moral efficiency as a Sunday school, let it criticize. The average city as it is now is absurdly inefficient in getting ethical results....How long will it take civilization to learn that nothing is so expensive as evil, and that nothing can overcome it so quickly and economically as good?”¹⁵⁰

Sheldon acknowledged that an avowedly Christian police force might encounter resistance in a pluralistic urban environment. “But how do you manage with a mixt population like that of New York to have Christian men and women in charge of blocks

¹⁴⁹ Charles M. Sheldon, “The New Police,” *Colliers*, Vol. 51, July 5, 1913.

of people? How can you get the people of New York to accept as policemen men who repeat the Lord's Prayer before they go on duty?"

His answer bordered on the notion that love would conquer all: "The Lord's Prayer is not doctrinal or sectarian. I would not have an officer on the force who could not say it out of his heart."¹⁵¹

Sheldon also had strong views on citizenship, politics and the importance of religion in government. In the 1921 book, *In His Steps To-day*, Sheldon let the Statesman, the Politician and the People hold court with Jesus on a variety of topics, including coal mining, farming, politics, media, drama, education, railroads, the home and international affairs. The following excerpts are taken from the chapter, What would Jesus do in Politics?

Jesus: Why should not the members of Congress themselves pray, unashamed, in the sessions of Congress? Many of them are members of My Church at home, and many of them pray in the family circle. Yet the moment they come to Washington, they seem to throw divine wisdom out of their counsels and lose their religion.

The People: There are millions of us in this country who believe in the power of prayer and in the Bible and in spiritual things. Why are all these powerful forces entirely ignored in legislation?...The politicians do not understand us common people.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Charles M. Sheldon, "The Great Catastrophe of 1913 and the Missionary Policeman," *The Independent*, NY, Nov. 6, 1913.

The Statesman: The highest forms of conduct must be possible in government. To say that idealism is out of the question in the political life of a people is to leave nations at the mercy of the professional diplomatist. I do not believe we are reduced to that depth of despair....Ideals are the only things that will redeem human government. The lack of them has made war and greed and selfishness triumph.

The People: There must be more politicians than statesmen in congress.

The Statesman: Yes—but the tremendous power of the American dollar is an insidious factor in American politics today.

The People: What does it mean to be Christlike in politics?

Jesus: Instead of answering the question as a dogma, let Me do it in the form of questions that I want you to think over...

Jesus' response revolves around training and education for statesmanship, active citizenship, repentance and prayer. "You cannot blame the bad politics you get and the bad government you live under if you go your own way and under this free republic make no protest and carry no cross."¹⁵²

Summary

As a representative character, Sheldon epitomized the passion and *compassion* typical of social gospel reformers. While we may disagree with his views on temperance and other matters, his life and works as a citizen administrator offer much to today's public reformer. His ability to fuse the seemingly incommensurables of personal faith and

¹⁵² Charles M. Sheldon, *In His Steps To-day*, (NY: Fleming H. Revell, 1921), pp. 62-68.

social concern into meaningful action is instructive for our own struggle with the tensions afforded by administrative discretion. His instinctive need to understand what others were thinking and feeling—demonstrated by his provocative technique of “boarding around” with parishioners, play acting the role of unemployed until he was as desperate as the next fellow, and spending weeks with the people of Tennesseetown—reminds us of the key to effective administration within a democracy. If his was to be a church “for the common people,” so was the government he envisioned.

Chapter 6 - The Enduring Legacy of *In His Steps*

It was one of those glorious cherry-tree days in Washington, D.C. The day was so lovely, in fact, that even a discussion of supplemental refugee appropriations could be improved by a draft of fresh air. That's why my budget counterpart at the State Department and I decided to meet for a picnic lunch in Lafayette Park—or Peace Park, as it called by the protesters who frequent the benched and treed area just across from the White House. Each of us played our roles beautifully, she making a strong case for the “need” and I expressing doubt about yet another unanticipated budget request.

All was going according to script until a shabbily dressed man stuck his head in between us and asked for money. With a look of annoyance bordering on disgust, the State examiner, who a moment before had begged me for \$20 million for “boat people” in Southeast Asia, shook her head. Feeling much internal conflict, I looked at the man and offered him my apple. He frowned and walked away, and we went back to our “roles.”

Low Literary Value; High Moral Value

“It was Friday morning and the Rev. Henry Maxwell was trying to finish his Sunday morning sermon....He settled himself at his desk with a sigh of relief and began to write. His text was from 1 Peter 2:21: “For hereunto were ye called; because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that ye should follow in his steps.”¹⁵³

So begins the second-most widely read Christian book after the Bible. The 1896 *In His Steps* has reportedly been read by two to three times the thirty million copies sold.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Charles M. Sheldon, *In His Steps*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1995), p. 1.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

Although it has been dubbed “sub-literary,” it had mass appeal because it “caught a latent trend and, by catching it with just the right nuances, whirled it ahead.”¹⁵⁵

Rev. Maxwell’s sermon eventually did get written—but it was not the logical, three-point treatise he had envisioned. Instead, it was “written” over the course of the next 200 pages and into the hearts of a score of characters.¹⁵⁶ And it all began when an unkempt, unemployed “tramp” appeared at the minister’s door looking for work.

I don’t know of anything. Jobs are scarce—” replied the minister, beginning to shut the door slowly....You will have to excuse me. I am very busy this morning. I hope you will find something. Sorry...

The Rev. Henry Maxwell closed the door and heard the man walk down the steps. As he went up into his study he saw from his hall window that the man was going slowly down the street, still holding his hat between his hands. There was something in the figure so dejected, homeless and forsake that the minister hesitated for a moment...Then he turned to his desk and with a sigh began the writing where he had left off. He had no more interruptions, and...two hours later the sermon was finished, the loose leaves gathered up and neatly tied together.¹⁵⁷

If the writing of the sermon was interrupted, so was the delivery. The following Sunday, just as Rev. Maxwell “digs deep” and thrills his hearers with his lofty eloquence, the man enters the church, walks down the aisle and delivers the rest of the sermon:

¹⁵⁵ “Books that Changed America,” Eric F. Goldman, *The Saturday Review*, July 4, 1953, p. x.

¹⁵⁶ Charles L. Campbell, “A Not-So-Distant Mirror: Nineteenth-Century Popular Fiction and Pulpit Storytelling,” *Theology Today*, vol. 51, (January 1995), p. 574.

¹⁵⁷ Charles Sheldon, p. 2-3.

I lost my job ten months ago. I am a printer by trade. The linotype machines are beautiful specimens of invention, but I know six men who have killed themselves in side of the year just on account of those machines....I've tramped through this city for three days trying to find a job; and in all that time I've not had a word of sympathy or comfort except from your minister here, who said he was sorry for me...Of course, I understand that you can't all go out of your way to hunt up jobs for other people like me ...but what I feel puzzled about is, what is meant by following Jesus...Do you mean that you are suffering and denying yourselves and trying to save the lost, suffering humanity just as I understand Jesus did?...I get puzzled when I see so many Christians living in luxury and singing 'Jesus, I my cross have taken, all to leave and follow Thee,' and remember how my wife died in a tenement in New York city, gasping for air and asking God to take the little girl too. Of course I don't expect you people can prevent every one from dying of starvation, lack of proper nourishment and tenement air...I understand that Christian people own many of the tenements...they have good clothes and nice houses to live in, and money to spend for luxuries...while the people outside the churches, thousands of them...die in tenements, and walk the streets for jobs, and never have a piano or a picture in the house...”¹⁵⁸

The soliloquy ends when the man suddenly collapses on the sanctuary floor, emblematic of the collapse of gilded-age Christian complacency. The man dies of starvation one week later at the Maxwell home. Deeply affected by the incident and his own glaring hypocrisy, Henry Maxwell appeals to his congregation the following Sunday “for volunteers...who will pledge themselves, earnestly and honestly for an entire year, not to do anything without first asking the question, ‘What would Jesus do?’ And after asking

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 8-9.

that question, each one will follow Jesus as exactly as he knows how, no matter what the result may be.”¹⁵⁹

A handful of churchgoers, some prominent citizens of the town of Raymond, take the pledge. They include Ed Norman, editor of the *Daily News*, Alexander Powers, a railroad superintendent, local college president Donald Marsh, the wealthy heiress Virginia Page and gifted soprano Rachel Winslow, who “glowed with her particular beauty of light.”

Taking the pledge was one thing—determining what it meant in the context of one’s own life circumstances and in society at large was quite another. It was not something one could work out alone. Instead the small group met together regularly to sort through the questions and challenges that would inevitably arise as they tried to live up to the high demands of the pledge. They also met to provide encouragement and accountability. Insight would not come overnight; some paths were tried and rejected—and participants ran the risk that not everyone would agree with—or even understand each other’s decisions:

I’m a little in doubt as to the source of our knowledge concerning what Jesus would do,” said Rachel Winslow. “Who is to decide for me just what he would do in my case? It is a different age. There are many perplexing questions in our civilization that are not mentioned in the teachings of Jesus. How am I to tell?

There is no way that I know of,” replied the pastor, “except as we study Jesus through the medium of the Holy Spirit. . . . You remember what Christ said, “When the Spirit of Truth is come, he shall guide you into all the truth.” . . .

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

There is no other test that I know of. We shall all have to decide what Jesus would do after going to that source of knowledge.

What one church member thinks Jesus would do, another refuses to accept as his possible course of action. Will it be possible to reach the same conclusions in all cases?" asked President Marsh.

Mr. Maxwell was silent some time. Then he answered, "No, I don't know that we can expect that." . . . "But we need to remember this great fact. After we have asked the Spirit to tell us what Jesus would do and have received an answer to it, we are to act regardless of the results to ourselves. Is that understood?"¹⁶⁰

The impact of taking the pledge on each of their individual lives—and more broadly on the social conditions of the town of Raymond—fills the rest of the pages of the book. Although each individual experienced the pledge somewhat differently, it invariably led to concrete action.

Ed Norman ushers in drastic changes to the *Daily News*, presaging the reforms that Sheldon himself would make when he took the helm of the *Topeka Capital* two decades later. But Norman's "experiment" lasts long enough to affect the bottom line; his cancellation of the Sunday paper and coverage of prize fights and partisan politics eventually jeopardizes the future of the paper. It is only when, in response to the question, what would Jesus do?, does the heiress come forth with the hundreds of thousands of dollars needed to save the paper. The gifted soprano forgoes a promising professional singing career and instead finds herself leading revivals in Raymond's bowery—the Rectangle. The college president emerges from the respectability of the

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 17-18.

academic ivory tower to engage in local politics, and the railroad superintendent decides to expose corruption and, in return, is fired. Through various associations, the “pledge” spreads to larger cities, including Chicago, where a vibrant settlement-house movement turns men from the evils of drink, educates women in the ways of proper nutrition and supports general municipal and economic reforms.

In an engaging but sentimental parable style, Sheldon alternates between the omniscient and third person points of view. And, being a preacher by trade, he can’t resist a sermon now and then, as in: “O Christian America! How long....?” “Without reading at all like a sociological treatise, the book managed to touch briefly upon such topics as technical unemployment, trade unionism, monopolies, the “new woman,” the single tax, socialism, temperance, pure foods, settlement houses and city missions, the cooperative movement and “the mess in city hall.”¹⁶¹

Sheldon does not overly rely on an activist government to bring about a more just society. Dr. Marsh’s involvement with politics and the push to eradicate “license” is the only instance of a direct appeal to government. Instead, Sheldon appeals to individuals—and collectively the churches—to undertake a radical discipleship that extends from how people choose to employ their skills and talents to how and where they spend and invest their money, to whom they elect to office. In contrast to the prevailing premillialism of the period, Sheldon calls Christians to a dual citizenship in heaven *and* on earth. In numerous examples, Sheldon demonstrates that earthly citizenship entails suffering. It is a cross to bear. Such is the thoughtful deliberation of Donald Marsh:

“Maxwell, you and I belong to a class of professional men who have always avoided the duties of citizenship...doing work we have enjoyed and shirking from the disagreeable duties that belong to the life of the citizen...I confess with

¹⁶¹ ???

shame that I have purposely avoided the responsibility that I owe to this city personally...yet I have been satisfied to let other men run the municipality and have lived in a little world of my own, out of touch and sympathy with the real world of the people.

*This is where the suffering comes for me. It would not hurt me half so much to lose my position or my home. I loathe the contact with this municipal problem. I would so much prefer to remain quietly in my scholastic life with my classes in Ethics and Philosophy. But the call has come to me so plainly that I cannot escape. 'Donald Marsh, follow me. Do your duty as a citizen at the point where your citizenship will cost you something.'*¹⁶²

Impact

In His Steps was the seventh in the series of 30 sermon stories that Sheldon used to prod the members of Central Congregational to develop a social conscience and inspire them to action. The best-seller contains all the tenets of Sheldon's public philosophy: the greatest sin is selfishness, the greatest duty to love, the highest calling to serve. Appropriately, it was one book—out of 50—to make it to the mass market.

During the fall of 1896, soon after he started reading the book a chapter at a time for his evening services, Sheldon sold the serial rights for \$75 to the *Advance*, “a private weekly magazine published in the interests of Congregationalism.” On November 5, 1896, the *Advance* began publishing a chapter at a time, and by 1897 interest was sufficiently strong to merit publication in book form.¹⁶³

Sheldon made the tour of the large publishing houses, but to no avail. Miller questions the traditionally given reasons for the rejections—that the public wasn't interested in

¹⁶² Sheldon, *In His Steps*, p. 88.

religious stories (the 1897 bestseller was the religious *Quo Vadis?*) and that Sheldon wasn't a good enough writer. Instead, he hints that Sheldon's message was simply ahead of its time. An "office boy" at Fleming H. Revell Company is quoted as saying:

"We all of us made an unusually bad guess in publishing... Sheldon brought the book . . .to us and literally begged us to issue it in book form. But no, it was too revolutionary, too intensely practical. Evangelical as was our effort, this did not extend to the point where we would present Jesus as Sheldon did, as the intimate and concerned personal friend of mankind. Thrice we declined the publication... We had missed a golden opportunity. We were approaching 1896, politics was seething, religion was pushed somewhat to the background."¹⁶⁴

So Sheldon turned back to the *Advance*, which published a 25 cent paperback and cloth edition for one dollar in June 1897. Sales were brisk—into the hundreds of thousands—but then skyrocketed in 1899 when other publishers realized that Sheldon's copyright was invalid.¹⁶⁵ In his autobiography, Sheldon wrote that "within a year the book had been issued by 16 publishers, a prices ranging from a nickel to fifty cents."¹⁶⁶

Although the total volume of sales remains in dispute—as does the number of foreign translations and total royalties—it is safe to say that *In His Steps* was read by millions worldwide and that Sheldon himself profited very little from the book. After reviewing the evidence, Miller concludes, "If the count includes serial and periodical publications of the book, the total would surely be many tens of million, at least. If one counts only book printings, the total might be as few as 8 or 10 million."¹⁶⁷ Add to that the fact that books were often circulated widely; a Sheldon contemporary recalls speaking with a

¹⁶³ Miller, p. 76.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 78.

¹⁶⁵ As was customary for small periodicals, individual issues were seldom copyrighted.

¹⁶⁶ Miller, p. 83.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 85.

woman who, as a child, witnessed the circulation of the dog-eared book to 18 families. “Now just figure out the readership of that.”¹⁶⁸

Distribution was aided by word of mouth. “The aspect of ‘public’ conversion is important because many nonreaders cannot easily endure the solitude and withdrawal which is essential to reading. But when they read something which “everyone” is reading, when they wonder what Millie thought of this incident and how Mollie reacted to that, then reading becomes a social experience.”¹⁶⁹

Foreign translations are similarly difficult to ascertain—and Miller places the number between 25 and 30. In addition to being translated into the major languages of Western Europe, several from Eastern Europe and the Middle and Far East, *In His Steps* was reportedly translated into two constructed languages—Esperanto and Pasilaly. As for Sheldon share of the profits, Miller tallies up about \$10,000 in royalties, paid out over a number of years.¹⁷⁰

Notwithstanding the uncontested popularity of *In His Steps*, it is Rauschenbusch, not Sheldon, who is remembered by church historians as personifying the social gospel movement. Rauschenbusch was the systematic thinker, the purist arguing for a “high” Social Gospel. In contrast, Sheldon is remembered as the mass propogandist for the “low” Social Gospel—low in the sense that Sheldon’s evangelical skirts were showing.¹⁷¹ Because he “learned how to be and write of the people,” it was Sheldon’s “pious nonsense,” with its powerful ethical thumb rule of doing as Jesus would do, that would capture the hearts and imagination of the Progressive era. A critique in the *London Spectator* dated June 3, 1899 says it well:

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 87.

¹⁶⁹ *The 70th Anniversary Commemorative Edition of In His Steps*, Shawnee County Historical Society, 1967.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 82.

“Mr. Sheldon, though dissatisfied with the present state of society, is not a socialist; he has no theory of political economy—no knowledge of that science, we should say. There are few dogmas in his sermons...his moral is so carelessly wrapped up that it bursts through the paper. Yet there is something curiously Apostolic about this narrative method...we think the public buys them [the books] because it agrees with them. These books illustrate a “rule of thumb” for the production of a good life and this is what the average man wants. To our mind, their moral significance is increased 10-fold by their literary insignificance.”¹⁷²

But the so-called rule of thumb drew criticism from Sheldon’s gospel peers because it did not go far enough. Rauschenbusch criticized the “imitation of Christ theme” saying it “created no ideal of human society, demanded no transformation of social institutions, produced no collective enthusiasms, and furnished no doctrinal basis for a public morality.”¹⁷³

Yet the simple theme endured. To commemorate the 70th year since publication, one author reflected on the continuing puzzle of the book’s mass appeal. Offering “simple solutions for complex problems,” it “came out of an age of reform when idealists wanted to clean up politics, rid the cities of their slums, and find a personal answer to the moral confusion they knew existed in their lives.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ Ronald C. White, “Social Religion and Popular Culture—Two Case Studies,” *American Society of Church History*, Princeton University, 1981.

¹⁷² *The 70th Anniversary Commemorative Edition of In His Steps*, Shawnee County Historical Society, 1967.

¹⁷³ Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., “Charles M. Sheldon, Christian Social Novelist,” *Bulletin of the Congregational Library*, Vol. 33, Winter 1982. No. 2, p. 10.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

Influence

Whatever the final publication tally, *In His Steps* had (and continues to have) broad influence. Perhaps most telling is that the prophet was not rejected by his own. Following publication of *In His Steps*, members of Central Congregational took the pledge to do as Jesus would do. An 1899 article in the *Topeka Capital* reported that, “Those who have taken the pledge met the close of each of the six communion services held during the year and relate the experiences and ask questions and sing and pray together.” To which Sheldon added: “These consecration services are growing in usefulness and power and the church is better in every way on account of them. The pledge is purely voluntary and those who take it do not judge those who are not ready to do so. At every meeting, so far, additions have been made to the number who are willing to take the pledge. Other churches and endeavor societies are beginning to take the pledge and try to live it out in business and politics and everywhere.”¹⁷⁵

The same year, the *Topeka State Journal* reported that a new United Christian Party had embraced the principle that “We believe in direct legislation of the people, and in order to make a government from God through Christ, we should be governed in all things, lawmaking included, by the standard, What would Jesus do?”¹⁷⁶

At an 1899 meeting of the Good Citizenship Federation, a business man from Rochester, NY gave a testimonial to Sheldon’s work, which was picked up by the *Capital*. The article described how the businessmen of Rochester had been fighting the “brewers’ trust which boasted the ownership of the city government.” They had entreated both the mayor and the police chief to enforce the laws—“and we were insulted, of course.” To “clear out this thing in six months so that a decent citizen can get good laws enforced”

¹⁷⁵ “Tribute to Sheldon,” *Topeka Capital*, April 22, 1899.

¹⁷⁶ Miller, p. 94.

they were going to hire a speaker and pay him \$200. But they were advised to spend the money on copies of *In His Steps* instead. And they succeeded in half the time.”¹⁷⁷

The homegrown influence continued. In 1929, the *Kansas Prohibition Herald* reported that the anti-saloon league of Kansas had adopted the Sheldon “total abstinence plan.” In order to force compliance with the constitutional amendment by “drying up the consumer” and putting “the purveyor of liquor” out of business, Sheldon put forth a “total abstinence promise,” which was signed by every member of his congregation. The promise was adopted by the anti-saloon league, with the intent to circulate it nationwide—to pastors, churches, YMCA, civic groups, social organizations, colleges, universities and public schools. Being a “total abstainer,” the article read, “will help to increase the general welfare of all the people.”¹⁷⁸

Sheldon had particular appeal in England, the source of millions of pirated copies of *In His Steps*. As remembered some 70 years later, Sheldon “made all other popular writers of his day seem small....In England they call him the Great Devouring Sheldon. *In His Steps* has become a flood, and has swept over Great Britain as if a vacuum had been preparing for it for a thousand years. But his millions of readers are only part of the story. *In His Steps* has been an abundant pulpit theme....Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists have praised it, published it, preached it. In England, elections have been carried by it.”¹⁷⁹ Further, one town council in England reportedly installed the pledge of “What would Jesus do?” as the criteria in public decision-making.

A final tribute to the legacy of *In His Steps* comes from the Congressional Record, 79th Congress, 2nd Session, following Sheldon’s death. Introduced by the Hon. Arthur Capper

¹⁷⁷ “Tribute to Sheldon,” *Topeka Capital*, April 22, 1899.

¹⁷⁸ *Kansas Prohibition Herald*, March 1, 1929.

¹⁷⁹ *The 70th Anniversary Commemorative Edition of In His Steps*, Shawnee County Historical Society, 1967.

of Kansas in the Senate on March 19, 1946, a memorial was printed in Record with this introduction: “We must assume that every reader of Progress has read *In His Steps*.”¹⁸⁰

Writing for *The Saturday Review*, commentator Eric Goldman in 1953 cited *In His Steps* along with *The Federalist Papers* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as “one of the volumes that had a substantial role in changing America during a particular period.” In a “decade swinging for reform,” it “reached as many as 20 million Americans with its reformer’s insistence that Christianity means not fear of God but love of the distressed.”¹⁸¹

The impact of the “best-seller on nobody’s best-seller list” should not be underestimated. Concludes White, “Sheldon and *In His Steps* deserve to be studied in college, universities and seminaries. The “low” Social Gospel intersected the popular culture of its day to a degree that must be taken seriously . . . What the popular mind proposes” need not be disposed of by the sophisticated mind, but rather become the subject for teaching and learning.”¹⁸² Cordova is also mindful of Sheldon’s ability to draw forth the needed combination of both individual and social reform. “Since the Social Gospel contributed to Progressivism, the New Freedom, the New Deal, the New Frontier and the Great Society, perhaps Sheldon’s work as the chief popular propagandist for the movement and as a daily reformer in his own life should not be overlooked as unrealistic or impractical.”¹⁸³

Summary

How to explain the uncontested popularity of *In His Steps*? By all accounts, it was a sentimental story written by a so-so writer with nothing more to offer his readers than an axiom simple enough for a child to learn and apply. And yet it inspired millions of

¹⁸⁰ Congressional Record, 79th Congress, 2nd Sess.

¹⁸¹ Eric F. Goldman, “Books that Changed America,” *The Saturday Review*, July 4, 1953, p. 37.

¹⁸² White, p. 19.

¹⁸³ Cordova, p. 111.

readers in numerous countries and fueled an unprecedented period of heart-felt social reform and active citizenship here at home.

Because the axiom “what would Jesus do” is not prescriptive or legalistic, it has great power to both transform and to motivate. Because it is highly contextual, it survives religious and theoretical fashion. And because it is action-oriented, it has the power to unite people who may have little or nothing in common. Not bad for a four-word thumb rule. But what does it offer public administration?

Chapter 7 - Toward a Normative Theory

Meet John Hamre: a 47-year old white male, former CBO and Senate staffer, now the second highest-ranking civilian at the Pentagon with a “finger on the U.S. military button.” He’s also a “devout Lutheran” who is building a model of Notre Dame in his basement.

“My Lutheran background tells me that the world is populated with individuals who are on the one hand capable of remarkable acts of goodness and at the same time remarkable acts of brutality and cruelty,” says Hamre. “Some people respond with pacifism, some with military force as a counterbalance to that. I find myself all the time evaluating situations from that perspective.”

“When I was at the Congressional Budget Office, it was easy for me to say all that I am is just an analyst on the outside, presenting choices to people for them to decide. There’s no hiding. I’m in the middle of things now. The hardest thing for me is listening to the Beatitudes. It says, ‘Blessed are the peacemakers,’ not ‘Blessed are those with peaceful intentions.’”¹⁸⁴

In the Middle of Things

One purpose of this dissertation is to speak to the public servant who, like John Hamre, finds himself or herself in the “middle of things.” It is to help pack, so to speak, a normative “lunch bag” that can be opened up at a moment’s notice, providing motivation, inspiration and an outside or “higher” perspective in the decision opportunities afforded by administrative discretion.

¹⁸⁴ Bradley Graham, “A Struggle to Reconcile Job and Faith,” *The Washington Post*, Oct. 3, 1997, p. A17.

I have argued that the social gospel novel, *In His Steps*, and all that it came to mean in a very fertile period in the history of public administration, provides significant clues for the development of a normative theory for our field. To that end, I have demonstrated—in the life of the author Charles M. Sheldon—how the syncretic elements of faith and deed, private conviction and public action, truth and experience can and do work hand-in-hand to produce social good. The fusion of these seemingly incommensurable elements, it seems to me, is workable for a citizen-administrator such as Charles Sheldon, or an administrator-citizen such as John Hamre—or C. Everett Koop, for that matter.

James Bowman and Brent Wall cite Koop, the former U.S. surgeon general, as “an exemplar of moral and democratic decision-making.” His exemplary status results from a highly-effective fusion of personal virtues (independence, courage, honesty and integrity) with public virtues (public regardingness, tolerance, respect, pragmatism, and wisdom). Conceding that the portrayal of a representative figure is no substitute for a good theory, they assert that “it is no less true that good examples of ethics in action can be instructive and empowering for practitioners and academicians alike.”¹⁸⁵ Wamsley would go even farther, saying that in the work-a-day field of public administration theory is meaningless apart from practice, and *vice versa*.¹⁸⁶

But the climb from identifying an exemplar to culling out elements of a normative theory is formidable indeed; the realm of normative theory is scorched earth. As Bowman and Wall state, a viable public ethic is weakened by the lack of external validity and undemocratic because of the lack of construct validity.¹⁸⁷ The normative terrain is so scorched, in fact, that in the spirit of post-modernism, some have quit the search for a

¹⁸⁵ James S. Bowman and Brent Wall, “Koop as an Exemplar of Moral and Democratic Decision-making: An Axial Approach to Ethical Theory,” *Administration and Society*, vol. 29 (July 1997), p. 252.

¹⁸⁶ Gary L. Wamsley and James F. Wolf, eds., *Refounding Democratic Public Administration, Modern Paradoxes, Postmodern Challenges*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996), p. 354.

¹⁸⁷ Bowman and Wall, p. 251.

single all-encompassing theory of public administration—with all its positivistic and behavioral connotations.¹⁸⁸ In *The Soul of Politics* Jim Wallis expresses a characteristic weariness and willingness to abandon the theory project: “We don’t have any blueprints for a new system, and we shouldn’t look for any. At best, what we have are some spiritual guideposts and road maps.”¹⁸⁹

This, then, is where I would situate the thumb-rule, ‘What would Jesus do?’ It is one of the spiritual guideposts that could guide the field out of the current quagmire of expertise. Even more, it has a rightful claim to a normative philosophy or theory of public administration because it was the spiritual spark that inspired and motivated the refounding of the field. The fact that the norms, values and ideals of practical Christianity were later extinguished by the growing professionalism of the field, the rise of utilitarianism and the increasing emphasis on the ‘three Es’ of economy, efficiency and effectiveness does not diminish the importance of its contribution.

In His Steps-type thinking enriches our understanding of normative theory as process. In addition, it contributes five elements that would help restore the spirit of public administration. But before describing them, one more boulder needs to be overturned:

Why Jesus?

It seems odd, even bold, to be arguing for a seemingly sectarian axiom in a highly pluralistic age. Notwithstanding the fact that more than nearly 90 percent of Americans identify profess some belief in God, there are those that bristle at any suggestion that religious creeds have any business near or in the public square. As Bellah and others

¹⁸⁸ Wamsley, for one, would settle for a public philosophy that grounds our theorizing in norms, values and prescriptions. Wamsley, 1996, p. 361.

¹⁸⁹ Jim Wallis, *The Soul of Politics, Beyond “Religious Right” and “Secular Left,”* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1995), p. 175.

have pointed out, however, the naked public square has just about bankrupted the nation's moral capital.

Fortunately, the neighborly ethics of Jesus are compatible with a variety of meta-ethical theories. Theological themes such as the sacredness and essential dignity of human life and the idea of the “God image” stamped in each human being are common to America's various religious traditions. According to Lewy, these themes help direct the thinking of not only believers—but non-believers—toward “transcendent reference points” and raise their moral sensitivity in the process.¹⁹⁰ In addition, the ethics of Jesus are relatively easy to translate into action, which is so critical from the standpoint of public administration, and relatively hard to ignore or rationalize away. In short, they are more naggingly powerful than “reasoned philosophical discourse about duties and obligations.”¹⁹¹

Normative Theory as Process

Correcting the historical record to highlight the role social Christianity played in the moral history of public administration reveals a context that supported an alternative to a public ethic based solely on expertise. In this way, social Christianity shows itself to be entirely consistent with other normative approaches to public service, particularly the understanding of public administration as process.

In contrast to other conceptions of public administration—as management, as politics, as organization—process allows the movement and discourse necessary for reinvigorating a democratic public service. In contrast to the Men of Reason, who either know “the answer” or are at least certain that one exists, a process model of a public administration requires us to suspend certainty and to acknowledge the ambiguity of situations. As Hart recognizes, “the most difficult human problems of government cannot be solved by

¹⁹⁰ Lewy, p. 135-6.

rules...they require the arduous *processes* of applying general moral principles to specific cases, with all their contingencies, to arrive at wise and compassionate decisions.”¹⁹²

Perhaps the seminal work on social process, as it applies to public administration, is *The New State* by Mary Parker Follett. Defining group process as “an acting and reacting, a single and identical process which brings out differences and integrates them into a unity,” Follett demonstrates that the development of “a collective feeling” and a “collective mind” is essential to democracy.¹⁹³ Effective process occurs not by supplanting “my idea with yours,” but by “harmonizing differences through interpenetration.”¹⁹⁴ Rather than existing at polar extremes to be simply accepted or rejected by the group, similarity and difference are “interknitted” into an altogether new approach or idea that emerges from authentic group encounter.

McSwain seems to adopt this “process view” in calling for a renewed concept of citizenship, which is “essential to the construction of a vision of the public interest.” Although the traditional focus of governance correctly conceived of citizenship as a reciprocal process, it has been overshadowed by contemporary administrative theory that depicts the administrator as Simon’s rational actor and the citizen as merely a repository of individual rights.¹⁹⁵

The implications of a process view are significant: First, it implies that no one single statute or action can quite attain the moral significance of the process by which it was achieved. Furthermore, in acknowledging the tentative and exploratory nature of the

¹⁹¹ Lewy, p. 137.

¹⁹² D.K. Hart, “A Partnership in Virtue Among all Citizens: The Public Service and Civic Humanism,” *Public Administration Review*, 1989, vol. 49, p. 103.

¹⁹³ Mary Parker Follett, *The New State*, (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1965), p. 33.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Cynthia McSwain, “Administrators and Citizenship: The Liberalist Legacy of the Constitution,” *Administration and Society*, 1985, vol. 17, p. 131.

field and the presence of heterodoxical elements, a process view enables us to forsake the masquerade of the politics/administrative dichotomy and live with—and draw energy from—the incommensurability that was there all along.

In His Steps offers several insights in this regard. First, the interrogative case of the axiom What would Jesus do? is significant for our purposes. Because it is not a declarative statement of truth, as in “The data all suggest that this is the right thing to do,” the axiom allows for other opinions, other vantage points and most of all, fruitful discussion. We may (and likely will) disagree about what we think “Jesus” would do but such disagreement opens new avenues to explore, taking us to places where consensus becomes possible. Rather than shutting down conversation between a public servant and his muse, or between the agency and the polity it serves, the open-endedness of the question allows movement, growth and experimentation.

Process open-endedness also entails humility. In *Adding Cross to Crown*, theologian Mark Noll calls the Protestant church to adopt a posture of political humility as it engages in public life. Often known more for its righteous triumphalism than its humble servanthood, the church should “season images of Christ’s kingly rule with images of his suffering on the cross.” The basis for doing this stems from the nature of the incarnation itself. As Christian theology goes, the mystery of the incarnation is its “doubleness,” that is, that Jesus was at once as fully human (the carpenter’s son) and fully God (the long-awaited Jewish Messiah). Thus, “a fully Christian politics will incorporate the full weight of contingent circumstances, developments and events in particular cultures as well as the general truths of the Christian revelation.”¹⁹⁶

The concept of doubleness furthers our understanding the incommensurability inherent in public administration. According to Noll, the idea of doubleness highlights the close

connection between the particular and the universal, or local reality and general truths—which created no end of problems for Enlightenment thinkers. Thus, “we should not be surprised that in “every human sphere—including politics—to confront situations where two apparently different, or even contradictory, things are present indissolubly in one actual reality.”¹⁹⁷ Accepting the incommensurability of such situations is troublesome for Men of Reason because it “highlights the element of contingency and particularity in all our temporal endeavors.” Such elements are especially hard to incorporate into bureaucratic structures, which were created precisely to overcome the inefficiencies of particularism.¹⁹⁸

Nevertheless, this “doubleness” offers an open well of humility that makes one teachable and willing to experiment. As Sheldon stated, “it has been said that we have passed the experimental state of government. I do not think so. We have settled some things in regard to government, but not all, and as a nation we are still practicing in serious ways the details of governing ourselves.”¹⁹⁹

A second contribution to normative process has to do with the book’s parable-like nature. Not only does *In His Steps* exhibit characteristics of a modern-day parable, but the characters themselves often referred to Gospel parables in pondering the “right” course of action. Probably the greatest storyteller of all time, Jesus often taught his disciples and others in parables, or short illustrations from which the listener “can draw out for himself moral and religious truth.”²⁰⁰ Not only does the technique make the assimilation of the particular truth easier, it is more memorable and meaningful than mere didacticism. In contemplating a parable, the listener in effect, teaches himself. Parables are evocative, but not necessarily definitive; in the case of the Gospel parables,

¹⁹⁶ Mark Noll, *Adding Cross to Crown, The Political Significance of Christ’s Passion*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), p. 21.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ Charles Perrow, *Complex Organizations*, 3rd ed., (New York: Random House, 1986), p. 6.

¹⁹⁹ *A Charles Sheldon Yearbook*, compiled by Charles Crane, 1909.

many have succumbed to the temptation to discover more truth in them than originally intended.²⁰¹

The field of public administration has and uses its own set of parables—in the form of case studies. Writing in 1952, Harold Stein of the Inter-University Case Program defines a public administration case as “a narrative of the events that constitute or lead to a decision or group of decisions by a public administrator or group of public administrators...The studies contain much detail and an effort is made in the composition, by a variety of rhetorical devices, to give the reader a feeling of actual participation in the action...Emphasis throughout is on decision, whether as an act or process...”²⁰²

While the cases do not attempt to impart “absolute” truth, “they do supply the kind of historical material that represents a sufficiently practical re-creation of reality to make analysis and discussion useful and meaningful to practitioners as well as students.”²⁰³

In addition to the use of the interrogative and parables, which contribute to our understanding of normative theory as process, *In His Steps* offers five clues to recapturing the lost “soul” of public administration. The elements of submission, empathy, covenant, grace and hope can help restore a close relationship between the American people and the government that serves them.

Submission

The axiom, “What would Jesus do?,” which is repeated more than 200 times in *In His Steps*, has broader application than its theological orientation might suggest. The

²⁰⁰ J.D. Douglas, ed., *The New Bible Dictionary*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 932.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Harold Stein, ed., *Public Administration and Policy Development, A Case Book*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952), p. xxvii.

²⁰³ Ibid., p. xxxviii.

structure of the question and the use of an external reference point are useful for public decision-making.

For the public administrator, *In His Steps*-type thinking might begin with personal notions of the highest moral good and then extend to a broad concept of the “the people.” For example, it might lead an EPA administrator to ask, ‘What would the fathers and mothers and children who live near this polluted river think about this policy option?’, as opposed to simply evaluating options according to more “objective” criteria such as efficiency or which congressional district the river lies in.

For Frederickson, who calls public servants to embrace social equity as a key pillar of their vocation, the ideal observer might be “those who do not otherwise have access to public policy processes” or those to whom public servants must ensure that regime values extend.²⁰⁴ Wallis would take the concept directly to the level of the poor, who lack effective political representation. He cites, by way of example, a Catholic diocese in Saginaw, Michigan that asks “one simple question” before making decisions about programs or buildings: ‘How will this affect the poor?’²⁰⁵ As he exclaims, “What a revolution would occur if public policy decisions were subjected to the same process!”

Submission necessarily implies the existence of authority—an idea that is no stranger to the literature of public administration. Follett viewed moral authority as arising more from cooperative relationships and social processes, what she termed “the law of the situation,” than from “hierarchical edict.” Orion White, as quoted in Frederickson, argues that authority is fundamental to the ability of social institutions to move beyond a

²⁰⁴ Frederickson, p. 113.

²⁰⁵ Wallis, p. 192. The idea is basically synonymous with asking what would Jesus do if one considers that Jesus defined his ministry as preaching the good news to the poor.

traditional role of needs and wants satisfaction to one oriented toward the “our mutual realization and development.”²⁰⁶

Building on these ideas, the idea that a symbolic Jesus is present “whenever two or three or gathered in his name” suggests that the “authority” of the situation is evoked in close personal encounters. Thus, the eventual answer to the question “what would Jesus do” resembles less a moral code received from “on high” and more like a spiritual connection that emerges in the interpersonal space between persons.²⁰⁷ In this way, *In His Steps*-type thinking signifies a horizontal relationship-based ethic, an ideal that holds promise for public encounters between administrators and citizens.

Submission in the context of such rich, synergistic relationships is not an end in itself; to be effectual for public administration it must contribute to process and lead to action. According to Follett, submission to the law of the situation fosters consensus, although not necessarily agreement. From consensus it is a short walk to concerted, positive action, something near and dear to the heart of every public administrator.

Empathy

The axiom ‘What would Jesus do?’ further enriches normative theory by encouraging openness, listening and ultimately empathy.

Epistemologically, the axiom does not ask, ‘What is the *right* thing to do?,’ which implies that there is something “out there” that is knowable and observable and that all we need to do is figure it out. Rather, it asks us to imagine what would [Jesus, the public, the poor] do in this or that concrete situation? Rather than dictating a response, or even assuring us that there is one, the axiom requires us to place one’s feet in the

²⁰⁶ Frederickson, p. 26.

²⁰⁷ This is not inconsistent with the Social Gospel with its emphasis on the immanence of Jesus the Son—rather than the transcendence of the God the Father.

other's shoes and walk around a bit in them. In short, it grounds our thinking in relationship to some "other," which is essential to restoring the legitimacy of public administration. Borrowing from Wallis again, "every project, idea and system must be evaluated by whether it moves us toward greater connection with one another."²⁰⁸

In order to begin to contemplate or imagine what the "Jesus" would think or do, greater understanding is required. The question itself should drive inquiry and research. For example, those pondering what Jesus might do or say would be driven to the Bible, where they can observe him in various public encounters. As the Rev. Henry Maxwell explains to the members of the church who took the pledge, "We must know Jesus before we can imitate Him."

For public administrators, the operative question should inspire field work to discover, at a grass roots level, what is really happening and what the people really think. This requires more than book learning, more than polling data, more than running simulations or statistical regressions or analyzing stakeholder claims. And it should begin in schools of public administration.

Olivia Hidalgo-Hardeman, professor of public policy evaluation at the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, puts "faces and places" on government statistics. On regular basis she takes students by van to Pittsburgh's Hill District, one of the city's poorest neighborhoods, to keep students from becoming desensitized and to help them ask "better questions." "I want students to approach the problem from a variety of perspectives, rather than one that is typical, because what is typical got us into the situation in the first place."²⁰⁹

²⁰⁸ Wallis, p. 191.

²⁰⁹ Jeff Griffin, "The Numbers Game," *Pitt Magazine*, September 1992, p. 5.

Similarly, in a 1979 article that would have made Charles Sheldon proud, it was reported that architectural students at Kansas State University spent four months in Tennesseetown working with citizens to identify and address problems with development. According to Nabeel Hamdi, the visiting professor from London who oversaw the project, “I told the students to deal with the neighborhood improvement exercise on a personal level. The project required a lot of sensitivity to deal with nitty gritty problems.”²¹⁰

The point here is not to extol the virtues of field research, which is generally recognized as important to the academy of public administration. Rather, it is to give such research a new motivation—or to revive a very old one. Recalling Sheldon’s experience with Tennesseetown, his quasi-scientific investigation of the physical and social needs of the community was stimulated by a pressing need to understand the people as well as a deep concern for their well being. As was quoted earlier, “The investigating of conditions is not sociology unless it helps the man.”

Field research undertaken by a broadly representative cadre of civil servants also can help cure the defect of our constitutional order—that of limited representation. As Federal Farmer laments:

“A small representation can never be well informed as to the circumstances of the people, the members of it must be too far removed from the people, in general, to sympathize with them, and too few to communicate with them: a representation must be extremely imperfect where the representatives are not circumstanced to make the proper communications to their constituents, and where the constituents

²¹⁰ “Students Study Topeka’s Tennessee Town,” *Topeka*, June 1979, p. 43.

in turn cannot, with tolerable convenience, make known their wants, circumstances and opinions known to their representatives.”²¹¹

Empathy in action equates to servanthood. The main purpose of asking ‘What would Jesus do?’ is not simply to answer a hypothetical question, but to actually try to “walk in his steps.” For Sheldon, as for the characters in his novel, those steps led to varying degrees of personal as well as corporate suffering. Reorienting our thought processes and actions around the exigencies of the *other* is not for the faint-hearted. It will usually cost us something.

For example, following the death of Loreen, a young, working-class woman befriended by Rachel and later became the unfortunate victim of a whiskey brawl in the Rectangle, the upscale congregation experienced a “baptism of tears.” As Sheldon wrote, “they had been living on their surface feelings so much that they had almost forgotten the deeper wells of life.” The outpouring of emotions had a purposeful effect as it “led to a meeting full of broken prayers of contrition, of confession, of strong yearning for a new and better city life.”²¹² As mentioned earlier, Dennard perceives emotions as possible “bridges to democratic relationship.”²¹³

What makes people willing to suffer for others? At core, the motivation is love. As Jesus said, “There is no greater love than this, that one is willing to lay down one’s life for a friend.” Jefferson not only believed that citizens should love their country more than themselves, but that citizens were also to be loved. Sheldon shared this view, saying:

²¹¹ Storing, ed., *The Anti-Federalist*, p. 77.

²¹² Sheldon, p. 118.

²¹³ Dennard, in Wamsley et. al, p.

“The Republic will never take further steps toward liberty....unless its leaders are genuine lovers of their kind. You cannot eliminate this great factor of the love of mankind and have any leader left. You can take away every other quality and leave love in the heart, and still have some strength and hope for leadership; but you cannot take away or leave out of leadership the love of man for mankind and have anything else worth having.”²¹⁴

Covenant

The idea of a covenant—from the theological understanding of a sacred “pact” or promise between God and people to the democratic ideal of a social contract between people and their government—resonates deeply with Americans. For more than 350 years, John Winthrop’s famous “city on a hill” sermon delivered aboard ship in the Salem harbor in 1630 has informed our national understanding of collective covenantal life. “We must delight in each other, make other’s conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes...our Community as members of the same Body.”²¹⁵ For the Puritans, the individual act of conversion conferred membership into the larger Body of the church. Because of a rich understanding of covenant, there was no conflict between the individual and community, as we have today.

Covenant embodies the idea of trust, of some solemn bond that exists between two parties. The oath to uphold the Constitution may symbolize the covenantal relationship between the public servant and the citizen, but will remain a wooden artifact unless embedded and activated in the wider civic community. Similarly, the pledge to do as Jesus would do owed much of its power to the commitment on the part of individuals to meet together regularly, sharing their struggles and questions and holding each other accountable to their high calling and chosen courses of action.

²¹⁴ *A Charles Sheldon Yearbook*, compiled by Charles Crane, 1909.

Bellah calls this the “church idea.” “It reminds us that authority need not be external and oppressive. It is something we can participate in. A church that can be counted on and that can count on its members can be a great source of strength in reconstituting the social basis of our society.”²¹⁶

Grace

Our increasingly heavy rule-based system of governance, a legacy of the zealous anti-corruption reforms of the Progressive era, has been blamed for a loss of flexibility, creativity and morale among public servants.²¹⁷ One can almost hear DeTocqueville whispering “I told you so.” Early on he observed the crippling effect of “a network of small, complicated rules, minute and uniform, through which the most original minds and energetic characters cannot penetrate...Such a power does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes and stupefies.”²¹⁸

Aside from the debilitating effect on public employees, Kettl states that “too much emphasis on ... rules makes government too inner-directed. This emphasis, in turn, deflects attention from the needs of the people.”²¹⁹

In contrast to the “low-road” of excessive regulation, the axiom we have been discussing offers a relationship-based regulatory system. Law, in theological terms, is the “no.” It emphasizes the distance between God and humans, and, as such, it is powerless to produce humility, compassion and love. In contrast is the gospel—or grace—symbolized

²¹⁵ Bellah, et. al., *Habits of the Heart*, p. 28.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

²¹⁷ John R. DiIulio, Jr., ed., *Deregulating the Public Service*, (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1994), p. xv.

²¹⁸ Alexis DeTocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. x.

²¹⁹ Donald F. Kettl, “Deregulating at the Boundaries of Government, Would it Help?” in John J. DiIulio, ed., *Deregulating the Public Service*, (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1994), p. 188.

in the life of Jesus, who fulfilled the “just requirements of the law” without a hint of legalism, who was moral without being moralistic. In asking ‘what would Jesus do?,’ the public servant inserts grace into the public policy equation. Paradoxically, the ethical quality of the policy outcome is not diminished, but rather raised to a new standard.²²⁰

In effect, one gets more ethical mileage out of an internally or community based regulatory system than one composed merely of laws and regulations. If, as a field, we are to rediscover the “spirit” in public spiritedness, then we must reexamine the spirit-quashing role played by the “dead letter of the law.”

Hope

With their post-millennial focus and weakness for modern utopianism, Social Gospellers were optimistic to a fault. Perhaps they misjudged the human capacity for evil, and certainly they placed too much faith in Progress and in the scientific innovations of their day. But to the degree that they had hope and vision for a better life, they make an important contribution to normative theory. “Without vision, the people perish,” says the biblical prophet. The loss of hope and vision can paralyze a polity and impoverish future generations as it feeds on a philosophy of “eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.”

Sheldon had a clear sense of kingdom, a vision of what he wanted society to look like. Temperance loomed large in that vision—and he worked tirelessly in the hope that someday Prohibition would be the law of the land—even as his views were dismissed as “pious nonsense.” According to Wallis, he was in good company. “Hope unbelieved is always considered nonsense. But hope believed is history in the process of being

²²⁰ For example, where the law of Jesus’ day said that committing the act of adultery was a crime worthy of death (to the woman, at least) Jesus raised the “cross bar” when he located morality in the heart. Under the gospel, one was guilty of adultery by simply looking at woman lustfully and committing the sin in the heart.

changed.”²²¹ Furthermore, as McSwite points out, whatever one thinks of Prohibition, it represents the first time in our history that people chose to use government to define the style they wanted to live.²²² Dr. Martin Luther King also had a visionary dream, which served to motivate and inspire and sustain the civil rights movement. Once the vision was clearly articulated, committed action quickly followed and the country was forever changed. Says Wallis:

“From the perspective of the Bible, hope is not simply a feeling or a mood or a rhetorical flourish. Hope is the very dynamic of history. Hope is the engine of change. Hope is the energy of transformation. Hope is the door from one reality to another.”²²³

Pessimism and cynicism are the modern substitutes for hope. What was once praised as the “American century” is winding down to an impotent end. A new vision of America is needed. How shall we then live? That is the question only a community can answer. Public servants, with all their representativeness, bending to the authority of an ideal observer and having internalized the public virtues of empathy, covenant, grace and hope will likely play a key role in encouraging and articulating that new vision.

Joppolo’s Heart for Administration

Perhaps no work of administrative fiction better illustrates the elements of normative theory just presented as *A Bell for Adano* written by John Hersey in 1944. Major Joppolo, “the American who broke through red tape and discovered the heart of Italy” embodies the ideals of empathetic servanthood, even to the point of personal suffering; although thoroughly successful in his job, he is ousted on completely absurd charges.

²²¹ Wallis, p. 283.

²²² McSwite, p. 122.

²²³ Wallis, p. 282.

Even as his popularity grows with the people, an incriminating memo wends its way through the military bureaucracy spelling his fate.

The setting is Allied-occupied Italy. Joppolo has been sent to administer the small town of Adano. In the face of great confusion and distrust on the part of the people, Joppolo soon discovers that his military briefing book stuffed with “pages filled with notes on civilian supply, public safety, public health, finance, agriculture, etc.” is far less useful than his own “Notes to Joppolo from Joppolo, which read:

*Don't make yourself cheap. Always be accessible to the public. Don't play favorites. Speak Italian whenever possible. Don't lose your temper. When plans fall down, improvise.*²²⁴

Although Adano appears, at first blush, to be most in need of food, potable water and clean streets, Joppolo soon discerns that material provision won't be enough. Adano's real need is to have its identity restored—and the town bell, damaged during the war, is emblematic of the emotional center of the town. In a discussion with his assistant Borth, Hersey's stereotypical bureaucrat, we see what the military establishment thinks of Joppolo's attempts to find a bell:

*As usual, major, you're letting your heart run your head. Forget the bell and clean up the alleyway. This is too sentimental, this bell business.*²²⁵

But Joppolo persists and manages to provide both the town's material and spiritual necessities; he finds them a bell. As a result of his improvisational style and sensitivity to the needs of the people, Joppolo wins the hearts of the Adano. As one citizen

²²⁴ John Hersey, *A Bell for Adano*, 1944, p 13.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

remarked, “You can walk in any time all day. He stands up when you enter.”²²⁶ In training his Italian underlings in the fine art of public administration, Joppolo employs a working description of democracy that rests heavily on the concept of servanthood:

*Democracy is this: it is that the men of the government are no longer masters of the people. They are the servants of the people. What makes a man the master of another man? It is that he pays for his work...Therefore you are now the servants of the people of Adano...you must behave as the servant of the man without shoes just as much as of the baron...And watch: this thing will make you happier than you have ever been in your lives.*²²⁷

As a farewell gift, the town has his portrait painted by a local artist.

*You can see in the picture that that man wishes that each person in the town of Adano should be happy. That is a very big thing in a face.*²²⁸

Indeed, that kind of mutual happiness would be a “very big thing” for public administration.

Summary

From its parable-like nature to its allowance for discourse and improvisation, *In His Steps* offers a wealth of insights to our normative theorizing about public administration as process. The powerful religious concepts of submission, empathy, covenant, grace and hope have much to say to our field about how we relate to each other, to citizens, to ambiguity, to law and to the future. Together they capture the soul of public administration.

²²⁶ Ibid., p. 36.

²²⁷ Ibid., p. 42.

²²⁸ Ibid., p. 233.

Chapter 8 - From Topeka to Tangier

At this centennial mark, the need to retell the story of *In His Steps* and consider how the central message could reinvigorate public service has never been greater. Many in our nation are deeply concerned about our languishing habits of the heart, but do not see the solution in the moralistic claims of the Religious Right. On the other hand, Democrats are kicking themselves for letting Republicans “capture” the family values issue. Many yearn to recapture a lost spirituality, but the guideposts appear few and far between. And if the destination is unclear, we have lost the ability to even ask each other for directions; when religion and politics were banished as suitable dinner table topics, our discourse became as barren as the naked public square.

In calling for a new values discourse, Eberly stakes out a “middle ground between secularism and sectarianism,” where most Americans place themselves in the so-called “culture wars.” While secularism has failed to supply transcendence, sectarianism has “framed spiritual restoration almost entirely in terms of politics and power.”²²⁹ For religion to be reintegrated with public life, it must avoid becoming another “ism” and seek a dialogue that is “sensitive to religious pluralism and democratic institutions.”²³⁰

Bellah’s concept of a “public church” offers some hope, but it is unclear whether churches today are up to the task of mending the breach; not unlike the wounded churches following the Civil War, churches today are split doctrinally, socially, geographically and racially. In contrast to the Puritan church, with its firm grasp on both the individual and corporate elements of the creed, many churches have exchanged their prophetic voice for an inwardly-focused therapeutic faith. Others have lost the will and ability to confront existing power structures because they are “highly commercialized

²²⁹ Don E. Eberly, *Restoring the Good Society: A New Vision for Politics and Culture*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1994), p. 16

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

and committed to the same measures of success as nonreligious institutions.”²³¹

According to Os Guinness, this embrace of modernity has been tantamount to “dining with the Devil,” making the “megachurch” highly unfit for shaping a postmodern society.²³² “Gone are the hard sayings of Jesus,” Guinness laments. Churches that demand nothing are the churches “most in demand.”

In His Steps—with its emphasis on relationship over power, humility and suffering over expertise and shadows over certainty—beckons a weary populace. If the century-old story provides a needed tonic to public administration, surely it has a message for the church as well. Intones Bellah: “Survival of a free people depends on the revival of a public virtue that is able to find political expression...Is it possible that we could become citizens again and together seek the common good in the post-industrial, postmodern age?”²³³

On Tangier Island, the answer just might be yes.

Against the gray light of an El Nino morning on the Chesapeake Bay, the Angela Violet—outfitted for harvesting crabs but equally useful for transporting pregnant Tangier women to the mainland hospital—took the pounding of the waves far better than her eight passengers. Crammed into the cabin, we were very careful not to burn ourselves on the oil heater heaving in the corner—and very grateful not to be out swallowing water on the deck.

“Y’all got to deal with the traffic going to work every morning,” said the ship’s captain in a thick Elizabethan drawl. “It’s the same for me. I got to fight the Chesapeake every

²³¹ Ibid., p. 23.

²³² Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil, The Megachurch Flirts with Modernity*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1993).

day.” The trip from Crisfield, Maryland to Tangier Island, Virginia would take 50 minutes and all the strength in our fingers to keep from falling into each other.

Of course, our lives were already becoming intertwined. Stocky, mustached and serenely confident in his ability to take the waves, Captain Nanner Pruitt and fellow waterman Jan Marshall had graciously agreed to make the unscheduled 7 a.m. run to Crisfield to pick up some “observers” of the two-day public meetings. Having been up for hours already, they talked easily about all the happenings on Tangier, not the least of which was the Town Council’s refusal to let Paul Newman and Kevin Costner shoot their movie there. But the bigger stir was the waterman’s covenant to “obey all laws, earthly and spiritual.” Now that was news. The red ribbon flapping wildly off the antenna of the Angela Violet indicated that Nanner Pruitt had taken the controversial pledge. Jan Mitchell wore a necklace with the initials WWJD?. To meet the likes of Pruitt and Marshall was the reason why we were now crossing the rough water to Tangier, bleary-eyed and hoping not to get sick.

In addition to myself and kin, the observers (also known as outsiders and strangers) included two bureaucrats—from the National Park Service and EPA—and two representatives of the Center for Public Justice, a non-profit based in Annapolis. Once on Tangier, we would meet up with others from the Army Corps of Engineers, NOAA, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, as well as representatives from state and county governments on both sides of the Maryland and Virginia line.

But the main draw was the citizens of Tangier (population 650). Having organized themselves into various stewardship committees several months earlier, they chose this weekend to “report out” their carefully worked out strategies and plans to preserve their

²³³ Bellah, et. al., p. 271.

heritage and their island. The problems they addressed varied widely in scope and severity. What to do with all the old refrigerators thrown in the ditches? The wild cats and their infernal spray? The motor oil containers they used to simply toss into the tide? And how to deal with the declining water table that was causing Tangier to sink little by little each year? Top of the list, of course, was the shrinking supply of blue crabs, on which 95 percent of the island's families depended, and the tightened state licensing requirements that made it "near impossible" for a son to follow his father's footsteps and take up the life of a waterman.

The Town Gathering on Stewardship for a Sustainable Tangier Island Watermen Community was not run by government representatives or elected officials; Tangier major Dewey Crockett was present in name only, stricken with a sudden case of gout and confined to a hospital bed in Crisfield. Nor was it held in a public building—but in the pews of the only two churches on the island. Meals were not catered, but all comers feasted on a spectacular potluck served by church women in the United Methodist Sunday School building. Tables groaned under the weight of clam fritters, jello salads, corn pudding and Tangier's famous 13-layer cake. There were no hotel accommodations to come by. When beds in the island's two B&Bs were full, observers were put up in the homes of the watermen. For free.

Instead, it was the people, most of them church folk, who had done the planning, the organizing, the faxing, the xeroxing, the cooking—and, it must be said—the praying. But that was not unusual for Tangier. Tom Horton describes a similar phenomenon on neighboring Smith Island in *An Island Out of Time*:

“It is difficult to speak of church...as something separate or discrete.

Emotionally, socially, economically and governmentally—through any lens you might use—church is too tightly interwoven with the rest of local existence to

unravel. It is the center of a place that by virtue of its watery surrounds, is inherently centered—the innermost point of a tight circle, including and enveloping—also radiating a security and constancy that seem particularly comforting in a place so dependent on nature’s vicissitudes.”²³⁴

The islanders had some outside help getting a common vision off the ground. Susan Drake, a doctoral student from the University of Wisconsin had come to Tangier a few months earlier to test her thesis that biblical teachings could serve as a basis for resolving environmental conflicts. The place was ideal. Not only was Tangier a deeply religious community (although the only two churches on the island had split over doctrinal issues back in the 1970s and later reconciled after Drake’s arrival), but it had also seen its share of conflict—with Maryland crabbers from neighboring Smith island and with Virginia authorities and with environmentalists, most notably the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. One waterman articulated the commonly-held view. “We’re the most hated in the bay. The state wants to absorb us.” Drake spent 14-hour days out with the watermen in the grim of winter, recorded 100 hours of conversations and gained their trust. When they invited her to take the pulpit one Sunday, she put the burden of change squarely on them:

“Is it not inconsistent to call upon Jesus to pilot you through the storm, and then do to our neighbor and to creation as you will? Can you be praying, ‘Thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven,’ and at the same time be dumping bait boxes, tin cans and empty oil bottles overboard, polluting God’s creation; or keeping small crabs, which is taking away your neighbor’s and your son’s and daughter’s livelihood? Would Jesus push himself to get one more bushel of crabs over his neighbor?

“It seems easier to blame the problems...on the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, the Virginia Marine Resources Commission or recreational fishermen. The true problem

²³⁴ Tom Horton, *An Island Out of Time*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), p. 179.

originates with sinful people—all of us who have not obeyed all the laws, and have not organized and unified to stand before the authorities to change the unfair laws.”²³⁵

The chastening must have hit a collective nerve. After delivering the strong message, Drake put forth a waterman’s covenant, one for professing Christians and one for “all watermen regardless of their profession of religious faith.” Fifty-six of the 150 watermen on the island approached the altar and promised to: “be good stewards of God’s Creation by setting a high standard of obedience to civil laws (fishery, boat and pollution laws), and commit to brotherly accountability. If any person has committed to this Covenant is overtaken in any trespass against this Covenant, we agree to spiritually restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.”

The Baltimore *Sun* picked up the story. Would the covenant supplant the powerful watermen’s association? Was it for the religious only? To this replied Bill Daley, former president of the watermen’s association and nonchurchgoer who nevertheless made the covenant, “You don’t have to be a [born-again] Christian to be a moral man, or to want to clean up the bay.”²³⁶

The covenant has its naysayers, of course; in roiling the existing power structure on the island, it has engendered deep resentment and tense public gatherings. Not every waterman has had his conscience pricked or sees the need to change. And some women oppose Drake for her stand against illegal crab picking, a vexation to Virginia health and sanitation officials but an important source of supplemental income. With her detractors, Drake stresses economic sustainability—and the need for contentment. As one of the watermen joked, “One of the best things about living on Tangier is that you can give your wife a credit card and there’s no place to use it.” (Tangiermen can still get away with such statements.)

²³⁵ Tom Horton, “Thou Shalt Not Pollute the Water,” *The Sun*, February 27, 1998, p. 2B.

For many, however, the covenant has prompted a reexamination of their views about biblical stewardship. What did it mean in Genesis that God had given humans dominion over the Garden? Hadn't they always assumed that anything goes? Carte blanche to use, abuse or exploit everything from buffalo to blue crabs? No, it does not, said Dr. Cal DeWitt, professor at the University of Wisconsin and a leading environmental ethicist. The key-note speaker at the conference (actually, he was the *only* speaker), DeWitt was as facile with scriptural passages as he was with the scientific names for crabs and marsh grass.

Translating the Hebraic word “tend,” DeWitt explained that Adam was given the task to *serve* the garden, an insight which gives the concept of conservancy new meaning. But in contrast to the preservationist impulse to keep things as they are “like turtles in formaldehyde,” the biblical idea of keeping means to “hold [something] together in dynamic integrity.” Eyes opened at this one. A “Save the Bayer” remarked later that the last thing the Foundation wanted was a “museum of the Chesapeake Bay,” while watermen felt a glimmer of hope that perhaps their heritage and livelihood could survive.

Another “earth-keeping” principle was the need for a Sabbath rest—not just for work-weary people, but for all of creation. Facing the audience of watermen, ever given to bigger boats, more crab pots and Sunday harvesting, DeWitt said bluntly, “Creation needs a time when you are not exploiting it.” Citing an obscure verse in the Old Testament book of Leviticus, he repeated God’s warning that if the Sabbath is disobeyed, then the land and the sea will take a Sabbath of their own—and it won’t come at a convenient time. One look at the crabbing statistics for Tangier suggests that the good book may have something to say, after all.

²³⁶ Ibid.

Tom Horton also has something to say—to more than just the people of Smith or Tangier:

“The islanders are not throwbacks at all; rather, harbingers of our future. They must live exclusively from a public commons—the Chesapeake, whose resources are emphatically finite and already stretched to the limit... We are all, in a sense, islanders. We just draw, as yet, from a bigger pool than the bay, and mask our overdrafts for a time with technology, or by flushing pollution off to “somewhere else.”²³⁷

Following DeWitt’s presentation, it was time for the testimonies, an open forum for watermen and their wives to talk about the stewardship effort, also known as the 2020 Initiative. It didn’t take much encouragement before two or three were on their feet:

“I’ve never felt so proud of our clean streets,” said one woman, referring to the recent community clean-up campaign. “We realized we were a dirty people.”

“I used to think it was a good thing to smuggle small crabs right behind the inspector. But now we have a fresh vision and fresh hope.”

“Are we going to wait until there’s tumbleweed going through the town? Wait for the government to come in? No! We don’t want our people on welfare, on food stamps or on medicaid.”

“We’ve begun to see that the laws are like medicine for the bay.”

“If we don’t change, we’re doomed.”

²³⁷ Tom Horton, *An Island Out of Time*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), p. 307-8.

“I don’t think I’ll sit down at table again to eat without giving thanks.”

That last remark served as a reminder that it was time for lunch. The sanctuary quickly emptied and nearly 100 people, one-sixth the population of the town, made their way down the narrow street to Swain Memorial Methodist church. We walked, of course; visitors are not allowed to bring cars on the island. Islanders may own them, but the preferred form of transportation appeared to be golf carts, followed by bicycles. The clean-up effort may be underway, I thought, but there is still far to go. Right off the road a derelict golf cart emblazoned with the Methodist cross and red pennant was abandoned to the weeds.

After stuffing ourselves—and helping clean tables and fold chairs, the participants moved into the Methodist sanctuary, where a prominent sign said “Please Obey the Holy Spirit.” The room was bright with light streaming through pastel stained glass, one of the island’s pleasantest sights. Horton had the same impression in Smith’s sanctuaries:

“Churches dominate the island physically...they are the tallest buildings, erected upon the highest ground. Their white steeples, catching the light, often are the first sights of habitation seen by visitors as they cross from the mainland...On their inside, island churches are very well cared for. They seem even more of a sanctuary, a refuge, than mainland houses of worship. Perhaps it is the contrast between a place so roughly exposed to sun and tide, weather and insects, and the warm polished woods, red carpeting, flower-bedecked altars, and high, airy interiors illuminated through stained glass. Central air conditioning helps, too.”²³⁸

²³⁸ Ibid., p. 179.

We spent the afternoon on hard pews listening to members of the three stewardship committees articulate their vision of Tangier in 2020 and then lay out goals, objectives and strategies for achieving it. The committees—dealing with the environment, economic development and fisheries—each had surveyed the residents for their views and received an average response rate of 60 percent. If dealing with the “stray pet problem” was the issue that took the longest to resolve, then it was the preservation of the shellfish industry and the state’s regulatory role that was the most inflamed. Jan Marshall, head of the watermen subgroup, appeared exhausted when he spoke of the difficult discussions and public opposition his group had faced. Susan Drake reportedly was having trouble finding a more permanent place to stay on the island; few outside the covenanting watermen families would rent her a room.

To assist the heritage preservation effort, Tangierwomen had organized themselves into an advocacy group called FAIITH—Families Actively Involved in Improving Tangier’s Heritage. Now equipped with a business card, website and fax machine, the group was making its presence felt in Richmond—even to the point of bringing their children into meetings of the General Assembly. “A congressman will say no to another man, but to a mother and child—it’s different,” said Betty Parks. Already FAIITH had scored some legislative success dealing with fishing licenses—but not without considerable time and effort. “They just don’t understand where we’re coming from...but we’ve realized that the scientists and the Save the Bayers are not our enemies. We just have to get them on our side. But it’s hard not to give up.”

The comment reminded me of one of the side conversations on the Angela Violet earlier that day. Nanner had chided one of Virginia’s bay scientists: “You have all your studies and surveys, but you need to come out with us on the water. We can show you what’s happening.”

After the last committee member sat down, Denny Crockett, principal of the combined school (150 students in grades K-12) and moderator of event, opened the floor to the observers. We had heard everything that was on their hearts and minds. What did we think of the stewardship initiative?

The poignancy of the moment was not lost on anyone. The people had spoken. What did the public servants have to offer in return? One by one, bureaucrats, activists and reporters stood up in the pews and took the microphone.

“This is a dream come true,” said a representative of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, “what is happening with Tangier...what we’ve heard. This is your struggle, but it is ours too.”

“I am inspired and humbled. You are searching your souls for the highest sense of right.”

“I’m wondering how do you know if it will work out—when you stand on principle and others don’t. How will you survive?”

“You need to somehow export this process.”

“Thank you so much for sharing your stories. I feel so comfortable getting to know you. I have a lot of ideas to take back home.”

“Don’t forget to build the children into your plans. They are your future.”

“When it comes from the heart and the spirit, there is no stopping your plans from being successful.”

“There are many others who have not come into your process. Don’t forget about them.”

The laudatory comments were spliced with practical ideas—offered freely and genuinely. Turns out that the town of Accomack could accommodate Tangier’s recyclables, if the island could supply a boat. Had watermen considered premium marketing of stewardship shellfish products to trendy metro-area grocery stores? Or about conserving precious fresh water by installing water-saving shower heads? One man offered to teach Tangier youth a new trade—how to make wood strip canoes. What about a shellfish cooperative, like Smith island had? Why not try to market your stories and folklore? Was there a Tangier cookbook? And much was said about specific government programs and funding sources.

Betty Parks frantically scribbled ideas in a spiral notebook. The people of Tangier appeared overwhelmed. But then, so were we.

The next afternoon, another man named Crockett (one of a handful of surnames on the island) ferried us back to the mainland. This time seas were calm. “Too bad Dewey couldn’t have been here,” he said about his brother the mayor. “He sure missed a great weekend.” As we pulled up to the Crisfield pier, a tall man waved to us. “That’s Dewey,” his brother said. “I’ve come to take him home.”

Submission, empathy, humility, suffering, covenant, grace and hope. It was a package deal on Tangier Island—for the citizens and the public administrators who would serve them.

Chapter 9 - Conclusion

This dissertation set out to rediscover the heart of public administration. The literature of the field has claimed that the “soul” is gone, that administration has become unhinged from a rich sense of the public, and that there is a pressing need to refound the field as a moral enterprise.

Through a variety of venues—from historical narrative to religious thought and practice and administrative fiction—I have attempted to show that public administration once did have such a soul, and that it stemmed from the religious and moral inspiration of the field nearly one hundred years ago. For that short period of time, the nascent field of public administration was not viewed as a bastardization of constitutional order, but as a noble endeavor in which beloved sons and daughters participated in their nation’s governance. Delving into that period for clues to our present-day normative theorizing has yielded the following insights:

The Social Gospel not only had a curative effect on a constitutional order given over to self interest, but it fertilized the intellectual seedbed of the field of public administration. The movement was not new; it was Anti-Federalist in its concern for the common good—and its new-found zeal to put government to work to secure it.

As a representative character of that era, Charles M. Sheldon provides an exemplar of a citizen administrator whose sojourn into the public square was characterized by deep faith, empathy for the common person and commitment to action—regardless of the personal cost. His optimism, innovation and creativity stand in sharp relief to today’s dispirited and over-regulated public work force.

Sheldon's best-selling book, *In His Steps*, stands as a pre-modern parable for moral decision-making in a dynamic and uncertain environment. In allowing for uncertainty, discourse and experimentation, the axiom "what would Jesus do?" enriches our understanding of normative theory as process. It also offers back the field's lost "soul" in the way of submission, empathy, covenant, grace and hope.

What is happening today on the island of Tangier puts this normative theory to the test. In making personal connections with the watermen—from staying in their homes to listening intently to their stories, concerns and plans—everyday bureaucrats are showing that it is indeed possible to rediscover the heart of public administration.

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