

In this article I undertake a daunting task.¹ I attempt to provide a brief survey of the state of social ethics in the United States and some of the important issues and controversial debates in this field. Doing justice to this topic would take far more space than permitted in this article. I therefore overlook many important areas of debate and significant work in Christian social ethics.² I propose here to focus on just a few of the most interesting and significant issues in the field of contemporary social ethics in the United States. Because I am a Christian ethicist, I will discuss the field of Christian social ethics, focusing on Catholic and Protestant ethicists, while mostly leaving out approaches to social ethics offered by philosophers and other religious traditions. In no way do I mean to imply that other religious and philosophical traditions have not offered important work in social ethics in the United States.

The article begins with a few general words about the history and general trends in Christian social ethics in United States. I will then focus on the following five areas: (1) the contribution of “ethics from the margins”; (2) the issue of poverty, with special attention to reactions to Pope Francis; (3) labor unions, inequality of wealth and power, and the common good; (4) real or imaginary threats to religious freedom; (5) growing opposition to the death penalty and (6) war and peace after 9/11. Each of these areas deserves its own lecture. In fact,

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² In this regard, I think of Lisa Sowle Cahill’s bridging of bioethics and Christian social ethics, as well as Margaret Farley’s bridging of sexual ethics and Christian social ethics. See Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Theological Bioethics: Participation, Justice, and Change* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005) and Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

many Christian ethicists have devoted entire books to them. Thus, my remarks barely skim the surface of complex issues and conversations. Nonetheless, I hope that they provide the reader with some useful insight about the landscape of Christian social ethics in the United States today.

Gary Dorrien, the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary, traces the historical development of social ethics in the United States in his magisterial book *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition*. He writes that the discipline of social ethics grew simultaneously with the Social Gospel movement, in which notable figures such as Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch decried the situation of the poor and the working class in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Alongside of these towering figures stood Frances Greenwood Peabody, a less renowned ‘social gospeler.’ Peabody established social ethics as an academic discipline at Harvard University in 1880. Others quickly followed suit. They wanted to replace moral philosophy in college and seminary education with this new discipline, arguing that ethics must explicitly reflect upon society’s “ethical dimension.”³ According to Dorrien, “they resisted an ascending social Darwinism in the social sciences and an ascending radicalism in the socialist and labor movements. They were advocates of liberal reform, good government, cooperation, the common good, and the social gospel of Jesus.”⁴ Thus, the liberal-progressive strand of Protestantism gave birth to social ethics as a discipline in response to the deleterious effects of laissez-faire capitalism, social Darwinism and militant socialism. The belief that “Christianity has a social ethical mission to transform the structures of society in the direction of social justice” gave impetus to this new branch of Christian theology.⁵ Throughout the 20th century other Christian thinkers developed their own strands of social ethics: African-American, Roman Catholic, liberationist, feminist, womanist, mujerista, evangelical, neoconservative and others. While similarities and myriad differences exist among them, they all share one characteristic feature of Christian social ethics in the United States: they undertook their work in order to ‘change the world,’ not to succeed in academia.⁶

³ Gary J. Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Chichester, U.K.; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 6; see also 15-51 for broader discussion of inception of the discipline.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.