

The Great Depression as Moral Failure:

Presbyterian Industrialists and a Religious Rationale for Opposing the New Deal

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Most historians writing about why most ideological conservatives opposed Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s focus almost exclusively on economic motives. As one scholar has recently written, conservative opponents of the New Deal resented its "attacks on wealth, [its] price-fixing, discouragement of private enterprise, inflationary policies, reckless expenditures, and unbalanced budgets."¹ Yet a sizable and influential regional contingent of anti-New Deal conservatives went further to explain why F.D.R.'s interventionist programs were wrong-headed and dangerous. The Presbyterians of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Scotch-Irish Calvinists well-represented in the steel industry and as stubbornly loyal to the principle of free markets as they were to the Presbyterian faith, opposed the New Deal because it had misdiagnosed the cause of the Depression. For these business-friendly Presbyterians, the economy was in a freefall

¹ Elliot A. Rosen, *Roosevelt, the Great Depression, and the Economics of Recovery* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 226. For other examples that describe opponents of the New Deal as motivated primarily by economic concerns, see Anthony J. Badger, *FDR: The First Hundred Days* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008), 133-134, 152; Ronald Edsforth, *The New Deal: America's Response to the Great Depression* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 158. For fears of political corruption in New Deal bureaucracy, see Jason Scott Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933-1956* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 142. One of the few even-handed and thorough attempts to trace conservative congressional opposition to the New Deal on libertarian and free market grounds is Marc Allen Eisner, "Environmental Policy from the New Deal to the Great Society: The Lagged Emergence of an Ideological Dividing Line," and Edward Berkowitz and Larry DeWitt, "Social Security from the New Deal to the Great Society: Expanding the Public Domain," in Brian J. Glenn, Steven M. Teles, eds., *Conservatism and American Political Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). For opposition to the New Deal among fundamentalist Protestants, see Joel Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 100-101. Carpenter describes fundamentalist opposition to the New Deal on the grounds that F.D.R. was a dictator paving the way for the Anti-Christ and the End Times; another critique among fundamentalists in the thirties was that economic planning was counter-intuitive and also encouraged an un-democratic concentration of power, a perspective more in line with President Hoover, the Republican Party, or the American Liberty League.

because of human failure, not the failure of capitalism. As one Presbyterian clergyman wrote, capitalism was the “oldest social order in the world” that “came down to us through thousands of years;” it was the “outgrowth of trial and experience.”² The problem of the Great Depression was not capitalism, they claimed, but the foolishness and greed of the individuals at the helm of this economic system, captains of industry who pursued personal wealth at the expense of workers and the public.

This description of the Depression as a moral failure on the part of the business leaders was common among Republicans at the time. As president Herbert Hoover stated in the early thirties, an “economic system cannot survive unless there are real restraints [upon] manipulation, greed, and dishonesty” in the marketplace.³ Yet Presbyterians in Pittsburgh took this moral failure critique further. For these modern-day Calvinists who believed in the pervasiveness of human sin, it was not merely the greed of the captains of industry but the greed of a secularizing, materialistic, mainstream culture that was to blame. The churches, too, had failed to speak out against as this modern, scientific concept of life that was claiming the hearts and minds of Americans. The Depression, these Presbyterians asserted, was God’s warning to a prodigal civilization worshipping the idols of science, technology, and individual gain. To support the New Deal was to cede victory to this materialistic concept of life that stressed economic and bureaucratic solutions to a problem that was fundamentally moral and spiritual. As one Presbyterian minister summarized, “Our nation needs to be reborn not by scientists, economists,

² “Does Socialism Profit?” *Presbyterian Banner* 121 (September 20, 1934): 4.

³ Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: The Great Depression 1929-1941* (New York: MacMillan, 1952), 27. See also David Burner, *Herbert Hoover: A Public Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 260-261.

financiers and political technicians, but by the Spirit of God at work in the hearts of all our people.”⁴

Pittsburgh’s Presbyterian community could assert such an un-modern, or perhaps pre-modern, idea that the Great Depression was God’s warning to a sinful society because of their ardent, some would even say stubborn, adherence to the basic tenets of Calvinist-Reformed theology. One expression of this faith in Calvinism reflected what sociologist Max Weber aptly termed “the Protestant ethic” and “the spirit of capitalism,” that the Christian’s basic duty was to work hard, to save one’s earnings, and to view prosperity as evidence of God’s blessing.⁵ If Weber’s theory linking Calvinism and capitalism is true then Presbyterian Pittsburgh would serve as excellent supporting evidence. As the Scotch-Irish settled in western Pennsylvania during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries their Presbyterian institutions flourished alongside the burgeoning railroad and steel industries. The Scotch-Irish and Presbyterian presence was so dominant that by 1900 three-fourths of Pittsburgh’s commerce was under the control of individuals with Presbyterian affiliations.⁶ It only helped that Presbyterians could claim such well-known industrial figures like H.J. Heinz, Andrew Mellon, and George Westinghouse among their members and others like Andrew Carnegie among their non-member benefactors. With ties like these and the habits of the Protestant work ethic well-ingrained, Presbyterians in Pittsburgh did not need much convincing to embrace the concept of free markets, Republican Party candidates, and to look askance at the youthful Democratic president promising a new deal for the American people.

⁴ H.H. Marlin, “Social Salvation for the United States,” *United Presbyterian* 91 (January 12, 1933), 2.

⁵ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner, 1930).

⁶ George F. Swetnam, “All Ye That Labor,” in William McKinney, ed., *The Presbyterian Valley* (Pittsburgh: Davis & Warde, 1958), 464.

Despite these ties to the steel industry, Presbyterianism was more than a prop to the capitalist order in early twentieth-century Pittsburgh. Members of these churches undoubtedly showed up on Sunday mornings because it was expected of anyone who intended to maintain his or her standing within elite circles.⁷ Yet ample evidence also suggests that Presbyterianism was a vital faith tradition for many of its 100,000 practitioners in Pittsburgh at this time. These churchgoers stressed basic Reformed themes such as the sovereignty of God over earthly affairs, human depravity, the necessity for constant self-analysis to expose this inclination to individual and collective sin, and the possibility of redemption through sincere repentance. To the vast majority of Presbyterians in Pittsburgh who spoke from pulpits and wrote in religious weeklies, God was still very much alive in the modern age. To these Presbyterian religious, dazzling new technologies and economic miracles had not altered humanity's desperate need for divine grace, a message that Presbyterian churchgoers heard regularly, years before the stock market crash in 1929.

As Presbyterian clergyman Clarence Macartney stated in 1919, a few years before he would assume the pulpit at First Presbyterian in Pittsburgh and become the region's most famous minister, "What we have seen upon the earth in the last four and a half years [is that] man is a moral being gone astray," that "man's nature [has] suffered a moral shipwreck." Contemporary thinkers, Macartney continued, had "jumped at the conclusion that they now could solve the enigma of history, of man, of God, of sin." But "God answered man out of the whirlwind of the world war." In sum, Macartney

⁷ Many have made this connection between Presbyterianism and social respectability in early twentieth-century Pittsburgh; see David Cannadine, *Mellon: An American Life* (New York: Vintage, 2008); and Joseph Rishel, *Founding Families Of Pittsburgh: The Evolution of a Regional Elite 1760-1910* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990).

concluded, the devastation and hatred unleashed in Europe during the First World War had shown the enduring truth of “that most ridiculed tenet of Calvinism,” “the old Presbyterian belief about the corruption of human nature.”⁸

Other Presbyterian clergy likewise ridiculed modern optimism about human nature in these years following the war. United Presbyterian minister and social reformer H.H. Marlin responded to the violence of the Great Steel Strike in 1919 with horror but assigned blame to all parties involved, not just labor or capital, as was common in this highly controversial public showdown. “*Both* business men and working men,” he stated, had “overreached themselves in their desire for money” and it was this common societal greed rooted in modern secularism, Marlin concluded, that had led to the violence in 1919. “The present age is alarming materialistic,” he continued, and “out of this extreme materialistic conception of life has grown the injustice of the industrial world, the violence and lawlessness that are sweeping the social world like a tidal wave.”⁹ Perhaps the Pittsburgh-area *United Presbyterian* weekly summarized this rather un-modern critique of World War I and its aftermath most succinctly: modern people had replaced the historically Christian “sense of sin” with a “materialistic philosophy of science,” the post-religious sensibility that prevailed in the jazz age twenties.¹⁰ Social plagues ranging from war to labor violence were rooted, Pittsburgh Presbyterians concluded, not in failed economic or political systems but rather in the corruptible heart of man.

⁸ Rev. Clarence E. Macartney, “Not Only a Christian, But a Presbyterian,” *Presbyterian Banner* 105 (Jan. 23, 1919): 8-9.

⁹ “Gary Speaks on America’s Economic Condition,” “The Preaching Demanded by Present Conditions,” *United Presbyterian* 79 (January 6, 1921): 4, 8.

¹⁰ J. D. R., “The Lost Sense of Sin,” *United Presbyterian* 85 (August 4, 1927): 5.

Given their reaction to the First World War and the social turmoil it sparked in the United States, Presbyterians in Pittsburgh already had a theological framework in place to interpret such events as the Stock Market Crash. To Presbyterians, the Depression was the outgrowth of a godless age and not the failure of capitalism as an economic system. Quoting the 1933 Presbyterian general assembly moderator John McDowell, Pittsburgh-area Presbyterians could claim with confidence that “All the social and industrial problems of America are problems of human relations” and therefore it is “not the business of the Church to furnish the world [with] an economic program.”¹¹ As the editors of the *Presbyterian Banner*, Pittsburgh’s other major Presbyterian religious weekly, wrote as early as 1928, the modern age might bring “airplanes ... filling the air like flies” and a “television” that “will throw on the screen any scene happening anywhere on the earth,” but that “faster travels and more sensational experiences” would never take the place of “richer, stronger [human] character,” as “only better people can make a better world.”¹²

If it was human character and not economic policies that fundamentally determined the well-being of a society, then in theory at least these modern-day Protestants could, and did, offer grudging support of President Roosevelt. For that reason H.H. Marlin could, in one breath, call Roosevelt “an American dictator” whose powers “insure drastic economies in government expenditures,” a world leader whose powers were equal to those of Hitler’s and Mussolini’s.¹³ And in the next breath Marlin could admit that the president might nonetheless possess the “courage to do the things

¹¹ John McDowell in H.H. Marlin, “Social and Industrial Problems are Religious Problems,” *United Presbyterian* 91 (July 6, 1933), 2.

¹² “2000 A.D.” *Presbyterian Banner* 114 (April 12, 1928): 8.

¹³ H.H. Marlin, “Dictator Roosevelt,” *United Presbyterian* 91 (February 23, 1933), 2; H.H. Marlin, “An American Dictator,” *United Presbyterian* 91 (March 23, 1933), 2.

which need to be done,” the “elemental manhood to meet a national crisis” and “slash mercilessly ... forms of criminal waste of public funds.”¹⁴ The message in Presbyterian Pittsburgh was, at the very least, consistent: human character, and not modern scientific, technological, or economic designs, was the real factor in making a just or unjust society.

For these Presbyterians the cause of the Depression, then, was not capitalism but rather capitalists, sinners of every type, who had used an otherwise neutral economic system for excessive individual gain. As Pittsburgh’s Western Theological Seminary professor and editor of the *Presbyterian Banner* James Snowden stated in 1934, “the profit motive” was sound. “The difficulties arise when men seek and secure, by fair means or foul, unreasonable profits ... those [individuals] are the kind of hypocrites about whom Jesus talked so scathingly ... [These] blood suckers [are] the creators of chaos.”¹⁵ If, as John McDowell stated, the “captains of industry” had “failed with the crucial test of their career,” “namely, the prevention of the current economic downturn” then at fault, too, was the business culture that encouraged and enabled their greed. Presbyterians in the thirties assailed this business culture of the preceding decade as one of “blind unreasoning superstition in the almightiness of money and money power,” where “bribery, racketeering, deceit, dishonesty, [and] gambling” were commonplace.¹⁶ And, Presbyterian clergy and laypeople preached, nurturing this business culture of the twenties was yet an even broader American mainstream where “selfishness, pride, vanity, self-will, materialism, belief, hate and fear” prevailed. Together, Presbyterians concluded, these things were not just hurting the economy or tarnishing the reputation of American business, but “destroying civilization” itself. And again, it was human sin that

¹⁴ H.H. Marlin, “An American Dictator,” *United Presbyterian* 91 (March 23, 1933), 2.

¹⁵ Joseph A. Stephenson, “The Profit Motive,” *Presbyterian Banner* 121 (October 11, 1934), 7.

¹⁶ John McDowell, “Revolution or Reconstruction?” *Presbyterian Banner* 118 (August 27, 1931): 10.

ultimately was at fault for the failure of the current capitalist system and not capitalism itself. “Our collapse is not primarily economic,” wrote one Presbyterian layman, “but spiritual . . . We have a surplus [in the capitalist system] of every material factor needed to make a prosperous and happy nation . . . [But] instead of seeking first the kingdom of God, we have been seeking first everything else—wealth, security, pleasure.”¹⁷

If Presbyterians found fault with the captains of industry, corporate culture in the twenties, and an ever-secularizing mainstream, they also could find fault with themselves. Dating back to the 1890s, a sizable minority of Social Gospel Presbyterians in Pittsburgh had prodded their Presbyterian brethren to pay more attention to the plight of the working classes. But compassion for the worker was a hard sell to a religious community with such clear ties to the booming steel industry, an industry with a sometimes-passionate hatred of labor unions. By 1917 these reform-minded Presbyterians and capital-minded Presbyterians did manage to reach a compromise, however, a business-friendly model of reform that prized volunteer citizen leadership over governmental oversight of the economy. Individuals in power, in this case Presbyterian laity, would use their influence to raise wages and improve conditions in the mills.¹⁸ Taking these voluntary measures, the argument went, would stave off union radicalism, government regulation, but was also a basic Christian duty that every professed Protestant should act upon. Churches, for their part, would serve the poor through evangelism efforts, education, and of course would provide financial and practical assistance to the poor living in Pittsburgh’s many working class immigrant enclaves.

¹⁷ Carl Vrooman, “The Spiritual Factor in the Present Crisis,” *United Presbyterian* 95 (January 3, 1935): 10.

¹⁸ This was a progressive-era conservatism that reflected the outlook of Herbert Hoover; see David Burner, *Herbert Hoover: A Public Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 260.

Although this volunteer, private sector-led reform model proved fruitful during the prosperous 1920s when the economy was at its strongest, it would fall short once the Depression hit. With the steel industry operating at 12 percent capacity and four out of ten workers in Pittsburgh unemployed by 1932, the public's needs far outweighed what even generous middle and upper-class Presbyterians could give.¹⁹ Working-class voters in Pittsburgh expressed their anger by choosing Democratic candidates over Republicans in election after election on the local, state, and national level through the thirties. The Scotch-Irish Presbyterian, and Republican, establishment that had ruled Pittsburgh with a paternalistic hand for over a century was now at an end; from the thirties on, the Steel City would be a bastion of pro-labor, Catholic, and Italian or Polish politics firmly in support of the Democratic Party. Suddenly decades of forewarning on the part of progressive-era journalists, reformers, and Social Gospel clergy and laypeople came back to haunt these now-repentant Presbyterians: "Christian men and women acknowledge penitently their failures [in prior decades] to build the kind of industrial communities that would reflect the peace, the justice, and the brotherhood of the Kingdom of God" wrote John McDowell. "The Christian church has [had] a responsibility in and for this industrial crisis," he later elaborated, "that cannot be denied or evaded."²⁰

Despite issuing this *mea culpa* in the realm of religion, in the realm of politics, however, most Presbyterians in Pittsburgh remained firmly anti-New Deal. While denouncing liberal and radical attacks on the profit motive, they sustained their faith that

¹⁹ Michael Bernstein, *The Great Depression: Delayed Recovery and Economic Change in America, 1929-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Edward K. Muller, "Metropolis and Region: A Framework for Enquiry into Western Pennsylvania," in Samuel P. Hays, ed., *City at the Point: Essays on the Social History of Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 181-211; Kenneth Heineman, *A Catholic New Deal: Religion and Reform in Depression Pittsburgh* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 11.

²⁰ John McDowell, "Revolution or Reconstruction?" *Presbyterian Banner* 118 (August 27, 1931): 10; John McDowell, "A Labor Day Message," *Presbyterian Banner* 124 (August 26, 1937): 3.

capitalism could work again if the right people were at the helm. “The Presbyterian elder,” wrote one, could use his position in business to “give employment to as many [deserving unemployed] men as possible.”²¹ “If people are honest and altruistic,” another Presbyterian stated, then they “can make almost any social order work.”²² Regardless of the sincerity behind these statements, the message of responsible capitalism fell on deaf ears by the late thirties. Pittsburgh’s now-Democratic majority of voters had heard enough, as had most Presbyterians themselves. As versions of Reformed and Calvinist Protestant evangelicalism flourished in Pittsburgh during the post-World War II era, they would do so with evangelistic outreach, theological education, and social service as leading themes. The defense of capitalism was no longer a Presbyterian article of faith and was conspicuously absent from their ventures thereafter.

If it is true that this intersection between religion and politics in Pittsburgh did not yield the kind of sweeping reform of business and civic life that its advocates wished, might we still learn something from Presbyterians’ story? Does their attempt to reconcile free market capitalism with Christian ethics suggest, as Russell Kirk, William F. Buckley, and more recently the editors of *First Things* have contended, that the modern conservative movement has been defined by more than a defense of the *status quo*?²³ Are conservatives’ hearts made of coal, as some have suggested, or does genuine compassion hold at least some sway over their thinking? At the very least, the example of Presbyterian Pittsburgh begs further inquiry into the nature of modern conservatism if,

²¹ “Unemployment,” *Presbyterian Banner* 116 (September 19, 1929): 8.

²² “The Bearing of Religion on the Social Order,” *Presbyterian Banner* 116 (April 10, 1930): 9.

²³ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953). George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 74.

for no other reason, to understand a far-reaching and quite-resilient movement that will probably be with us for some time.

