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Aimee Semple McPherson's Pentecostalism, Darwinism, Eugenics, the Disenfranchised, and the Scopes Monkey Trial

A *Foursquare Crusader* headline published Wednesday, January 24, 1934, shouts: "Sister Defies Evolution!" An expansive photo pictures "Sister" raising a fist upward towards a giant, King Kong figure that overshadows her. The photo's caption asks readers to choose: "God or Gorilla?" detailing that "Sister Defends God's Word in Debates Against Evolution." Aimee Semple McPherson's figure pales in size in contrast to the one representing the giant of her time: Darwinism. The image dramatically symbolizes the era and the evangelist's relationship with it.¹

The Progressive Era's seminal debate over Darwinism rose to a crescendo on July 21, 1925, 28 miles north of Cleveland, TN, at the city of Dayton, in a watershed event that would become a harbinger of the age: *The State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes*, commonly known as the Scopes Monkey Trial. Yet, little is actually understood about what happened there and the resulting implications that would go on to shape later decades of Pentecostalism and evangelicalism.

The popular recollection focuses on the fundamentalist-modernist controversy and the teaching of evolution in the public school curriculum as opposed to Christian fundamentalist creationism. Aimee Semple McPherson was involved with William Jennings Bryan, whose judicial battle challenged the Butler Act, a law prohibiting the teaching of Darwin's theory of evolution in Tennessee's public schools. Scopes violated this law by introducing a particular

¹ "Sister Defies Evolution," *Foursquare Crusader*, vol. VIII, no. 15 (January 24, 1934): 1.

textbook, *Civic Biology*, by George Hunter, at the Dayton High School. During the Scopes Trial, McPherson sent Bryan a telegram: “Ten thousand members of Angeles Temple, with her millions of radio church membership send grateful appreciation of your lion hearted championship of the Bible against evolution and throw our hats in the ring with you.”² To support the epic struggle, McPherson organized an all-night prayer service followed by a massive Bible parade through Los Angeles.³

A historical reconstruction of the context of this time suggests that much more was at stake than has been remembered by the media and the public. In part, what was at stake for McPherson was the welfare of the poor and disenfranchised. This paper will demonstrate that Aimee Semple McPherson reacted to and resisted Darwinism because of its popular social theory component, which was linked to eugenics,⁴ that directly assaulted her social gospel theology and praxis.

***Zeitgeist* and the Darwinism Debate**

In Aimee Semple McPherson and William Jennings Bryan’s world, Darwinism was far from today’s narrowly focused biological theory. Rather, it was positioned as an all-encompassing governing principle, akin to gravity, with sweeping, actively relevant social and economic ramifications. Bryan writes: “The central thought in evolution is ... continuous progressive change, according to *certain laws* and by means of *resident forces*” (emphasis

² Sutton, 37.

³ Aimee Semple McPherson to William Jennings Bryan, 12 July 1925, folder 5, box 47, Papers of William Jennings Bryan, Library of Congress. See also William Jennings Bryan to Aimee Semple McPherson, July 1925, dictated by Bryan and transcribed after his death, folder 7, box 47, *ibid.* See also, Sutton, 37.

⁴ The biological racism of late 19th century Darwinism is now both well documented and widely publicized. Especially influential in the development of biological racism was the theory of eugenics developed by Charles Darwin’s cousin, Sir. Francis Galton. Galton coined the phrase *eugenics*, which means “well born.” See also Peter J. Bowler, *Evolution: The History of an Idea*, 3rd Ed., (University of California Press, 2003), 308–310.

mine).⁵ These “certain laws and resident forces” are elsewhere described as “natural selection,” i.e., “survival of the fittest,” and assisting them is what eugenicists believed would promote human progress. Bryan saw no such governing force: “Evolutionists try to trace evolution in everything, whether physical, mental, or moral, but there is no proof that man advances toward perfection by any fixed law of nature.”⁶

A goal of this paper is to explore the *zeitgeist* of the era and reconstruct an accurate understanding of related events within it. When one looks back at the Progressive Era in which Bryan and McPherson lived, events and concepts can be framed anachronistically in contemporary constructions, despite the cultural shifts that have advanced over time. This paper will attempt to reconstruct what Bryan and McPherson, from their own perspective, understood when they boldly spoke against the rising popularity of the Darwinism embraced during the Progressive Era. It will attempt to explore deleterious social ramifications they considered resident in the theory.

Matthew J. Tontonoz argues that Bryan’s concerns were focused on “Social” Darwinism, which was seamlessly conflated with today’s more narrowly conceptualized biological Darwinism. “Bryan’s overarching concern was the threat to society posed by extrapolations of evolutionary doctrine—namely, Social Darwinism and eugenics. His commitment to the Social Gospel put him at odds with the concept of natural selection being applied to humans.”⁷ The “race-science” of the nineteenth century was co-opted in some ways by Social Darwinists to explain racial differences. “Darwinists, led by people like Herbert

⁵ William Jennings Bryan, *Seven Questions in Dispute*, (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924) 127.

⁶ Bryan, *Seven Questions*, 136.

⁷ Matthew J. Tontonoz, “The Scopes Trial Revisited: Social Darwinism versus Social Gospel,” *Science as Culture*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 121—143, (June 2008), 121.

Spencer and others, believed that the theory could be applied to the current social context and of course they believed that non-white races were simply less evolved based upon this theory, and that evolution itself naturally pitted one race against the other for survival.”⁸ Spencerian Social Darwinists coupled strongly antireligious views with contempt for the poor and uneducated. Often anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic, they promoted eugenics as a means of reducing populations of “unfit” individuals.⁹ Such popular strains of Social Darwinism would combine with nationalism and elitism to form a seedbed of entrenched racism and pernicious injustice.

Darwinism, Progressivism, Race, Gender, and the Social Gospel

Social Darwinism had swept the nation and globe, creating socio-philosophical proclivities that would eventually undergird a widening ethnic, gender,¹⁰ and racial divide. In the first fifteen years of the twentieth century Darwinism was considered to have had a secularizing influence on American society and was closely linked with Progressive Era

⁸ William H. Tucker, *The Science and Politics of Racial Research*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 29. See also, Christian Sundquist, “On Race Theory and Norms,” *Albany Law Review*, vol. 72, Issue 4, (2009): 953—960, 955.

⁹ Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers, A History of American Secularism*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004), 230.

¹⁰ Spencerian Darwinism had a great deal to say regarding the inequality of gender: “The biological racism of late 19th century Darwinism is now both well documented and widely publicized. Especially influential in the development of biological racism was the theory of eugenics developed by Charles Darwin’s cousin, Sir. Francis Galton. Less widely known is that many evolutionists, including Darwin, taught that women were biologically and intellectually inferior to men. The intelligence gap that Darwinists believed existed between males and females was not minor, but of a level that caused some evolutionists to classify the sexes as two distinct psychological species... Darwin himself concluded that the differences between male and female humans were so enormous that he was amazed that “such different beings belong to the same species...” See Rosaline Love, “Darwinism and Feminism: The ‘Woman Question’ in the Life and Work of Olive Schreiner and Charlotte Perkins Gilman,” D. Oldroyd and I. Langham I. (eds.) *The Wider Domain of Evolutionary Thought*. (Heidelberg: D. Reidel, 1983), 113-131. See also, Sue Vilhauer Rosser, *Biology and Feminism; A Dynamic Interaction*, (New York: Twayne Pub., 1992) 59. See also, Jerry Bergman, “Evolution and the Origins of the Biological Race Theory,” *Creation Ex Nihilo Technical Journal*, Vol. 7 (2), 1993, 155-168.

politics and the Freethought Movement.¹¹ Evolution is understood today primarily in terms of physiological genesis, but in the early century it also presented a widely-embraced paradigm for understanding social genesis and organization as well. Cultures, societies, and the world's people were contextualized through a version of Social Darwinism that presented some humans and societies as more biologically, intellectually, and morally progressed and advanced than others. Dangerous forms of thought, including racism and Nazism, fit nicely into a historic/philosophical foundation of a great chain of being¹² where in some of the world's peoples were more humanly evolved than others. The popularity of groups such as the Klu Klux Klan resurged as Americans responded to race scientists who imagined social dangers of integration and miscegenation between what it considered to be "superior" and "less evolved" races.¹³

¹¹ "Those who considered themselves in rebellion against spiritual and ecclesiastical authority called themselves 'freethinkers.' Freethinkers of the day might espouse a philosophical and religious Unitarianism and might include both social and scientific theories of Darwin, which were very popular at the time, the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, John Stuart Mill, and might even espouse socialist ideals and values." See also Margaret English de Alminana, "A Biographical Survey of 20th Century Female Pentecostal Leadership and an Incipient Egalitarian Struggle." Ph.D. diss., Glyndŵr University, U.K., 2011, 71.

"Although the nineteenth century is often thought of as a very pious age, it was a period of doubt and loss of faith for many thoughtful people. The intellectual and religious climate was already changing by the beginning of the nineteenth century and there were in America and England some very liberal churches and congregations, which, for example, rejected the doctrine of Hell, or who were, like the Unitarians, deists. There was widespread non-attendance at church, particularly amongst the urban working class: a survey carried out in England and Wales in March 1851 revealed that, out of a total population of 17,927,609, only 7,261,032 had attended church that Sunday.

Humanist thinking developed rapidly in the nineteenth century because it was closely associated with new scientific thinking and discoveries. Darwin's ideas, and new biblical research and scholarship coming from Germany, provoked a crisis of faith in many Victorian intellectuals, movingly evoked in Matthew Arnold's famous poem *Dover Beach*. Darwin's defender T. H. Huxley, coined the word "agnostic" to describe his belief that there were things that we could not possibly know.

Moral philosophy became increasingly detached from religion. Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill developed a "Utilitarian" definition of and basis for goodness. Friedrich Nietzsche attacked Judeo-Christian morality. The American psychologist William James speculated about the roots and varieties of religious experience. "19th century freethinkers," British Humanist Association, London, websource: <http://www.humanism.org.uk/home>.

¹² See Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being, A Study of the History of an Idea*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936 and 1964).

¹³ Jerry Burgman, "Evolution and the Origins of the Biological Race Theory," *Creation Ex Nihilo Technical Journal*, Vol. 7(2), 1993, 155-168; Jerry Burgman, "Darwinism and the Nazi Race Holocaust," *Ex Nihilo Technical Journal*, 13(2), 1999, 101-111.

Turn-of-the century Progressives also believed that society could be improved via the rational planning and intervention of government.¹⁴ Social progressivism was strongly undergirded by a global embrace of Darwinism, including what would later prove to be dangerous sub-currents within popular thought. “Evolution, with its vision of an organic progression from lower to higher species, provided a handy and influential, if intellectually dubious, scientific rationale for social progressivism.”¹⁵

Despite his deep rootedness in other Progressive causes, it was here that Bryan broke with the movement, costing him his well-earned place in the history of the Democratic Party.¹⁶ Tennesseans had recently voted overwhelmingly in favor of the Butler Act just two months prior to the commencement of the Scopes Trial in a time when the popularity of eugenics was at his zenith. “In rural areas of Tennessee folks may not have had a sophisticated grasp of Darwinian science, but they knew the eugenicists who preached Darwinism in the cities despised country people, called them ‘imbeciles’ and ‘defectives’ and would sterilize them if they got the chance.”¹⁷

Civic Biology—A Popular Eugenics Manual

A careful look at *Civic Biology*, the textbook in question at the Scopes Trial, reveals it as brazenly promoting eugenics as the “science” of being “well born.”¹⁸ The textbook taught Darwinism, which included Social Darwinism and eugenics, as science. It features a dark,

¹⁴ Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers, A History of American Secularism*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004), 230.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Dennis Sewell, *The Political Gene: How Darwin’s Ideas Changed Politics*, (London: Pan Macmillan, 2009), 170-171.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁸ George William Hunter, *A Civic Biology: Presented in Problems*, (New York: American Book Company, 1914), 235.

pre-Nazi Germany presentation of the pseudo-science. For example, a discussion of the hereditary dangers existing in the Jukes' family tree is found on page 236:

Parasitism and its Cost to Society.—Hundreds of families such as those described above exist to-day, spreading disease, immorality, and crime to all parts of this country. The cost to society of such families is very severe. Just as certain animals or plants become parasitic on other plants or animals, these families have become parasitic on society. They not only do harm to others by corrupting, stealing, or spreading disease, but they are actually protected and cared for by the state out of public money. Largely for them the poorhouse and the asylum exist. They take from society, but they give nothing in return. They are true parasites.

The Remedy.—If such people were lower animals, we would probably kill them off to prevent them from spreading. Humanity will not allow this, but we do have the remedy of separating the sexes in asylums or other places and in various ways preventing intermarriage and the possibilities of perpetuating such a low and degenerate race. Remedies of this sort have been tried successfully in Europe and are now meeting with success in this country.¹⁹

Generally speaking, contemporary Americans tend to consider that the specter of the national eugenics movement resulted from a fringe effort of junk science. Only recently are scholars such as Edwin Black and others rediscovering the impressive scope and wide embrace of the movement, an embrace found both at the cultural grass roots as well as the highest rungs of political and monetary power and influence. Eugenic laws existed in 27 states, and even were supported by Supreme Court legislation at the height of the movement.²⁰ A leader in the movement, Harry Laughlin, wrote: “America, in particular, needs to protect herself against indiscriminate immigration, criminal degenerates, and race suicide. The success of democracy depends upon the quality of its individual elements. If in these elements the racial values are high, government will be equal to all the economic, educational, religious and scientific demands of the times. If, on the contrary, there is a constant and

¹⁹ Ibid., 236.

²⁰ Edwin Black, C-Span Book TV, Edwin Black, Southern Festival of Books, YouTube Published Oct 22, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8xnFk0M3KYY&t=2502s>.

progressive racial degeneracy, it is only a question of time when popular self-government will be impossible, and will be succeeded by chaos, and finally a dictatorship.”²¹

Laughlin oversaw the Eugenics Record Office, founded in 1910 as a part of the Carnegie Institution in Washington, D.C. The organization was located in Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island, New York, where research was conducted and reported back to the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization of the House of Representatives in Washington, D.C.²² Chief Justice for the Municipal Court of Chicago, Harry Olson, believed that crime was related to heredity and inferior race, and considered eugenics an important tool in making cities safer. He writes, “Segregation is necessary, even though sterilization were invoked. Sterilization protects future generations, while segregation safeguards the present as well. The segregation of incorrigible defectives on farm colonies as a measure of crime prevention is urgently needed in the State of Illinois. However, in a number of states, fifteen up to the present time, experiments have been made with sterilization. The two theories of segregation and sterilization are not antagonistic, but both may be invoked.”²³

In 1911, New Jersey passed a measure creating a three-man Board of Examiners of Feeble-minded, Epileptics and Other Defectives to identify individuals for whom “procreation is inadvisable,” for prisoners and children residing in poor houses and other charitable institutions. The law included the feeble-minded, epileptics, certain criminals, and an ambiguous category of “other defectives.”²⁴ Court-designated counsel for the “defective”

²¹ Harry H. Laughlin, *Eugenical Sterilizations In the United States: A Report of the Psychopathic Laboratory of the Municipal Court of Chicago*, (Chicago: Psychopathic Laboratory of the Municipal Court of Chicago, 1922), v.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, vi.

²⁴ Edwin Black, *War Against the Weak*, 68.

individual was given five days to prepare for a private hearing to speak on his or her behalf before sealing the mandatory sterilization decision. No family-obtained counsel was permitted to join the process. New Jersey's governor, Woodrow Wilson, signed the bill into law on April 21, 1911, a year before he was elected as president.²⁵

The high-water mark of the eugenics wave washing over the nation reached the Supreme Court in the 1927 *Buck v. Bell* case. It concerned Carrie Buck²⁶ who was assigned for forced sterilization at a colony for the "feeble-minded." Following the high court's decision, Virginia's law was upheld mandating surgery for people who had been declared "socially inadequate."²⁷ The decision's brief was written by the celebrated progressive and Theodore Roosevelt appointee, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. In it he wrote: "It is better for all the world if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind."²⁸

Eradicating crime was purported as a goal and benefit of eugenics, and sterilizing criminals became a main method that continued well into the mid-century, with reports of sterilizations still occurring as late as the 1970s.²⁹ "Francis Galton himself listed eradication

²⁵ Ibid. 68.

²⁶ It has since been determined that Carrie Buck did not have an intellectual disability, but was poor and uneducated. She spent most of her life in an asylum. She had been targeted by the courts because of an illegitimate pregnancy, but it was later learned that she had been raped and not been "promiscuous." Her first grade report card showed a solid B average. *Buck vs. Bell* supplied a precedent for the eventual sterilization of 8,300 Virginians. See: Paul Lombardo, "Eugenic Sterilization Laws," University of Virginia, <http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay8text.html>.

²⁷ Paul A. Lombardo, *Three Generations No Imbeciles: Eugenics, the Supreme Court, and Buck v. Bell*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press: 2008), ix.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ "With Holmes' decision in hand, Carnegie's Cold Spring Harbor enterprise had unleashed a national campaign to reinforce long dormant state laws, enact new ones and dramatically increase the number of sterilizations across America. The intent had been to stop non-Nordic groups and others considered unfit. It continued into the 1970s, probably later." See Edwin Black, *War Against the Weak*, 402.

of crime on his eugenic agenda, and he saw sterilization as one method that advanced the crime-fighting plan. Similarly, U.S. criminologists saw a role for eugenics in sentencing. They argued that judges should be allowed to take hereditary propensities into account to set longer terms of imprisonment.”³⁰ Laughlin believed that antisocial behavior was resultant of “germ plasm,” and the impetus for keeping incarcerated in prisons, asylums, and work houses those deemed biologically inferior during their procreative years became surprisingly accepted throughout the nation. Another theme that rings over again and again is the need to lower the welfare costs related to these “defectives.” In 1926, Leon F. Whitney, a field secretary of the Eugenics Society of America, published a plan in *Christian Work Magazine* for eradicating crime by calling for sterilizing children deemed to be “genuinely bad.” These bad seeds should be reported by their teachers.³¹

Eugenicists tended to believe in the superiority of Nordic, Germanic, and Anglo-Saxon peoples. They supported strict anti-miscegenation and immigration laws. More than 64,000 individuals were sterilized in the U.S. between 1907-1963 under eugenic legislation. Virginia did not repeal its sterilization law until 1974.³² “Borrowing from Laughlin’s Model Law, the German Nazi government adopted a law in 1933 that provided the legal basis for sterilizing more than 350,000 people. Laughlin proudly published a translation of the German Law for the Prevention of Defective Progeny in *The Eugenic News*. In 1936, Laughlin was

³⁰ Lombardo, *Three Generations No Imbeciles*, 220.

³¹ *Ibid.* 231.

³² Paul Lombardo, “Eugenic Sterilization Laws,” *Eugenics Archives*.
<http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/html/eugenics/essay8text.html>.

awarded an honorary degree from the University of Heidelberg as a tribute for his work in “the science of racial cleansing.”³³

Charles Lee Smith, Darwinism, Racism, and Superman

If Azusa’s egalitarianism was an incipient religious force driving the early century, then Social Darwinism presented its most pernicious counter-challenge.

The Progressive Era’s understanding of evolution and Darwinism was an amalgamation of Social Darwinism, racism, atheism, the work of Galton,³⁴ and Nietzsche’s “Superman theory,” embodied in the teachings of Charles Lee Smith. Smith is vital to this discussion, for, as will be seen later, it was he whom Aimee Semple McPherson debated at the pinnacle of her assault on evolution. Smith edited *Truth Seeker: The Journal for Reasoners and Racists*, from 1937-1964, as a forum for free thought and atheism, and he was also a writer and distributor for it. In addition, Smith founded the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism in 1925.³⁵ For Smith, racism and Darwinism were seamlessly connected. His atheism was a protest against Christianity, which he considered a “‘Jewized’ religion that taught the brotherhood of man, [and was] an ‘equalizing’ doctrine that prohibited clear thinking about race.”³⁶ Smith rejected the notion that the segregation practiced in the American South was the answer to the nation’s racial problems. He considered that the “seepage of blood through social

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ The biological racism of late 19th century Darwinism is now both well documented and widely publicized. See also Peter J. Bowler, *Evolution: The History of an Idea*, 3rd Ed., (University of California Press, 2003), 308–310.

³⁵ John P. Jackson, Jr. *Science for Segregation: Race, Law, and the Case against Brown v. Board of Education*, (New York University Press, 2005), 55.

³⁶ Ibid.

barriers is inevitable... The final remedy is not segregation but gradual reduction, leading to virtual elimination, which Christians, from fear of everlasting pain, dare not practice.”³⁷

“Smith was the heir to a particular brand of Darwinism that conflated atheism with racism. In this he followed ideas first expressed by a French writer, Vacher de Lapouge (1854—1936), who, along with Arthur Keith, had been a corresponding member of the Galton Society.”³⁸ Lapouge “called for the elimination of all moral sentiment that would stand in the way of a massive breeding program that would eliminate racial inferiors.”³⁹ For Lapouge, the only solution to the alleged racial crisis was the elimination of what he considered to be the inferior races.⁴⁰ “Like Lapouge, Smith believed that atheism and racism were flip sides of the same coin.”⁴¹ He asserted that Christianity’s doctrine of spiritual equality was irrational and that physical differences confounded notions of the brotherhood of humankind. “‘This religion conditions its accepters against self-protection’ by denying the justice of racial and ethnic discrimination.”⁴² Smith argued that the most logical remedy for the alleged racial problems of his day included “legalizing and subsidizing abortion to prevent the birth of a mulatto or a Negro.” He writes: “Blinded by ‘Jew-led Love mongers... Americans simply cannot discriminate; having lost the use of these senses in judging others. They are Jewized.’”⁴³

Aimee Semple McPherson, Eugenics, and Social Darwinism

³⁷ Ibid. See also, Charles Smith, “The Stars Battle the White Race,” *Truth Seeker*, 84 (1967): 36.

³⁸ Ibid., 55

³⁹ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁰ Ibid.; On Vacher de Lapouge, see Jennifer Michael Hecht, “The Solvency of Metaphysics: The Debate over Racial Science and Moral Philosophy in France, 1890—1919,” *Isis*, 90 (1999): 1—24.

⁴¹ Ibid., 56.

⁴² Ibid., 56; Charles Smith, *Sensism: The Philosophy of the West*, 2 vols. (New York: Truth Seeker, 1956), 961.

⁴³ Ibid.; Charles Smith, “Love Mongers and Love Sheets,” *Truth Seekers*, 86 (March 1959); 40; Charles Smith, “A Misdirected Letter,” *Truth Seeker*, 84, (April 1957), 62; Charles Smith, “Eugenics: Sterilization of Defectives and Discrimination in Immigration,” *Truth Seeker*, 84 (November 1957), 173.

While much has been written about McPherson's passionate challenge to Darwinism and modernism, very little connects her struggle with the implications surrounding Social Darwinism and eugenics. The researcher must ask: How sophisticated and nuanced was McPherson's understanding of Social Darwinism and eugenics? Lacking the benefits of historical hindsight, did she have enough depth of understanding to see what lay ahead?

McPherson's national imprint included a battle waged throughout her ministry tenure with what she considered to be an endemic struggle with Social Darwinism. As part of this war, she shored up her support by joining forces with William Jennings Bryan, whose widely publicized Scopes Money Trial captured the nation's attention. Bryan preached at Angelus Temple on numerous occasions. Matthew Avery Sutton said, "They both found the social implications as much as the theological ramifications of evolution troubling."⁴⁴

Less than a year after the Scopes trial, in May 18, 1926, McPherson, whose public political assault only continued to increase, was kidnapped in a sensational event that deeply impacted her credibility.⁴⁵ H.L. Mencken, an admirer of Nietzsche,⁴⁶ noted journalist, close associate of Darrow and linked to the nascent ACLU, wrote scathingly negative articles about the Scopes trial and Bryan. No friend of fundamentalism, he also reported extensively on the McPherson kidnapping, but, interestingly in this case, deduced that it was a hoax set on defaming the evangelist.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 52.

⁴⁵ See Margaret English de Alminana, "Scandal and Censure: A Reinvestigation of the Socio-Political Forces Surrounding the Disappearance of Aimee Semple McPherson" *Canadian Journal of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity*, Vol 7, No 1 (2016). <https://journal.twu.ca/index.php/CJPC/article/view/156>.

⁴⁶ See Henry Mencken, "Notes on Democracy," (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1926).

⁴⁷ See Daniel Mark Epstein, *Sister Aimee: The Life of Aimee Semple McPherson*, (San Diego: Hartcourt & Brace, 1994), 314.

This paper began by referencing a celebrated graphic presented under the headline: “Sister Defies Evolution! – God or Gorilla?” The *Foursquare Crusader* brandished the headline that references the evangelist’s own public spectacle challenge in the cultural struggle: a notorious debate in which McPherson squared off with Charles Lee Smith. Smith was a formidable opponent in the event that echoed the Scopes trial, in both popularity and media fanfare.⁴⁸ The lead article, written by McPherson, describes the debate. “The man who is doing his best to pervert the hearts and minds of the youth and college boys and girls of America and Canada with the *doctrines* of Atheism [emphasis mine]. Yes, I met him in debate and I am no longer afraid.”⁴⁹ Those “doctrines,” as detailed earlier, were clearly one and the same with the theoretical foundation of the popular eugenics movement.

Are *Foursquare Crusader* readers, the article asks, sufficiently informed on the topic of evolutionary theory? “If not, the quickest way to obtain a comprehensive and quick summary of the arguments for and against is to purchase a copy of the book, ‘There Is No [sic] God.’ This contains the arguments presented for evolution by Mr. Chas. L. Smith, the country’s outstanding atheist, and those presented against evolution by Aimee Semple McPherson, the world’s leading Fundamentalist.”⁵⁰ This reference and others clearly contrasts McPherson’s understanding of evolution with the social theory being advanced in eugenics by Charles Lee Smith.

Quoting directly from the debate, *There Is a God: Debate between Aimee Semple McPherson, Fundamentalist, and Charles Lee Smith, Atheist*, McPherson decries the

⁴⁸ “God or Gorilla?” *Foursquare Crusader*, (July 11, 1934), 1-3.

⁴⁹ Aimee Semple McPherson, “News From the Debate Battle Front,” *Foursquare Crusader*, Vol. VIII—No. 15, (Wednesday, January 24, 1934), 1.

⁵⁰ “God or Gorilla?” *Foursquare Crusader*, vol. VIII—No. 15, (Wednesday, January 24, 1934), 20.

implications of Social Darwinism on social gospel efforts for the masses of the poor and disenfranchised. “If Mr. Smith were right we should tear down every church... No more Community Chests, for now we believe in the survival of the fittest; no more do the strong bear the infirmities of the weak.”⁵¹ McPherson also references Smith’s embrace of Nietzsche’s Darwinism that promoted war and struggle and abhorred Christian “pity.” (According to Nietzsche, Christianity was an evil force that permitted the survival of those of whom natural selection would rid the world. He writes: “The religion of pity carries with it the extreme, evil consequence of prolonging a number of useless lives which are really condemned by the law of selection.”)⁵² McPherson chides, “Mr. Smith, I don’t believe, right in the bottom of your heart, that you would like to live in a country that had not a church nor a Christian nor one who had the love of God in his heart.”⁵³

During the debate, McPherson illustrates her points with signature folksy, little vignettes, all of them referencing the social gospel, the poor, and the disenfranchised in some way. Clearly, McPherson considers that Social Darwinism (i.e., evolution) is a direct threat to her work in these communities.

Just as I was leaving tonight to come down to this building I saw a man who is the electrician at Angeles Temple. As he stood there by the car a moment I was thinking of how he came to the Temple some years ago, a drug addict, a drug peddler, suffering very much with his limb that had been amputated, because he had been a gambler, and had been thrown off a train and run over and his limb had to be removed. He came when only the dregs of life were left to him. He heard a Gospel sermon. He arose and came down the aisle and knelt at the altar. There he lifted up his heart and he prayed, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” Instantly his sins were forgiven, every bit of the

⁵¹ Aimee Semple McPherson and Charles Lee Smith, *There Is a God!: Debate between Aimee Simple McPherson, Fundamentalist, and Charles Lee Smith, Atheist*, (Los Angeles: Foursquare Publications, 1934), 44.

⁵² Henri Lichtenber et al., *The Gospel of Superman: The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, (London: T.N. Foulis, 1910), 138—139. See also, Jerry Bergman, “Friedrich Nietzsche’s Superman, a Child of Darwin,” *Creation Research Quarterly* Vol. 47, Winter 2011, 205—211, 207.

⁵³ McPherson and Smith, *There is a God!*, 44.

drug addiction fell away from him instantaneously and he was completely delivered. He has been with us some eight or nine years now and has never gone back to the dope. He tried to get rid of it in every other way before and had failed. But one moment of prayer and the work was done, and he found the Savior real to his heart.”⁵⁴

In her opening remarks, she links evolution to atheism, in similar fashion as Bryan, and she introduces the theory as an all-encompassing governing principle with social implications as well: “There are those who argue that Evolution is not a religion and has nothing to do with religion. In the next breath they will tell you that Evolution is not confined to the realm of nature; but that it permeates every avenue of thought and imagination.”⁵⁵

During the debate, McPherson refers directly to the father of Social Darwinism, Spencer, several times, indicating that she studied his writings in high school.⁵⁶ Although she does not reference his social theory directly, she boasts of having a detailed understanding of his work: “In Spencer’s writings, such as I studied in high school in Canada, there is a most interesting account of how we got our spine...” It was Spencer who coined the term, “survival of the fittest.” It was possibly his book, *Principles of Biology*⁵⁷ used to school the young evangelist. In it, he writes:

Always there must have been, and always there must continue to be, a survival of the fittest: natural selection must have been in operation at the outset, and can never cease to operate...Until at length, among the civilized human races, the equilibration becomes mainly direct: the action of natural selection being restricted to the destruction of those who are constitutionally too feeble to live even with external aid.⁵⁸

Spencer’s popular ideas help to lay the seedbed for the rise of the genetics. “Spencer saw the misery and starvation of the pauper classes as an inevitable decree of a ‘far-seeing

⁵⁴ Ibid., 39.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁷ Herbert Spencer, *Principles of Biology Vol. I.*, (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864).

⁵⁸ Spencer, *Principles of Biology*, 468.

benevolence,' that is, the laws of nature."⁵⁹ He argued that the purpose of nature was to rid society of weak: "A sad population of imbeciles would our schemers fill the world with, could their plans last....Why the whole effort of nature is to get rid of such—to clear the world of them, and make room for better."⁶⁰ Spencer suggests that weak beings are nature's failures who are placed by it on trial for their lives. "If they are not sufficiently complete to live, they die, and it is best they should die."⁶¹

McPherson assaulted Smith's defense of evolution by using posters to illustrate the theories of human origins and criticized their views by uncovering contradictions in the writings of Thomas Huxley, Charles Darwin, and Robert Ingersoll. "She asserted that evolution and atheism produced a brutal, inhumane advocacy of survival of the fittest, adding that such theories made social reform and charity pointless."⁶²

Smith was impressed by McPherson's depth of knowledge about the subject: "I have met the leading Fundamentalists of the nation...—and I am frank to admit to you that Aimee Semple McPherson is the greatest defender today of the Bible and Christianity. She has an extraordinary mind, particularly for a woman, but it has been so wrecked by revivalism, so warped by emotional attachments to meaningless symbols, that she does not know when she is talking nonsense."⁶³

⁵⁹ Edwin Black, *The War Against the Weak*, (NY: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003), 12.

⁶⁰ Herbert Spencer, *Social Statistics or Order: Together with Man Versus the State*, (NY: D. Appleton & Company, 1915), 205. See also, Edwin Black, *The War Against the Weak*, (NY: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003), 12.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁶² Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, 216.

⁶³ McPherson and Smith, *There is a God!*, 9. See also, Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, 216.

Other direct linkages to eugenics and its corollary ideas are found in various McPherson writings. In *The Bridal Call Foursquare*, published in September 1927, we see McPherson directly referencing eugenics and linking it to a case for Christian social reform in an article entitled: “God the Father.”⁶⁴ In a series of folksy salvos, the evangelist strikes against the tenets, which she refers to as “doctrines”⁶⁵ that she considers to be the main points of evolutionists’ error. The first salvo engages the popular notions of a “perfect man” or “perfect race.”⁶⁶

At a luncheon which I later attended they told me that Socialism was the only solution for the world’s problems, and that eugenics alone would produce a perfect race. Others told me that nothing but proper government could ever solve or calm the waves of crime, while others say that Education is the solution. Bring youth up right, Science states, “If you will produce perfect bodies, they will act perfectly.”⁶⁷

Here she addresses four implementation modalities of social progress: eugenics, socialism, government, and education. Her response to eugenics includes the popular notion of a perfect “man,” race of people, or superman, which echoes her friend Bryan’s arguments. She implies that her theoretical opponents—evolutionists—assert that eugenics would produce or accelerate the progress of human evolution. Both Bryan and Smith had linked this Progressive era understanding of Darwinism’s ‘survival of the fittest’ to Nietzsche’s superman theory. Bryan’s “emphasis on the connection between Darwin and Nietzsche led to a clear statement of the dangers of the new philosophy, which Bryan presented in his speech “Brother or Brute?” at the World Brotherhood Congress in the fall of 1920. Arguing that Nietzsche had carried Darwinism to its ultimate conclusion, Bryan accused the German philosopher of developing a

⁶⁴ Aimee Semple McPherson, “God the Father,” *The Bridal Call Foursquare*, (September, 1927), 4-5, 28-29.

⁶⁵ See Aimee Semple McPherson, “News from the Debate Battle Front,” 1.

⁶⁶ McPherson, “God the Father,” 28.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

philosophy that “condemned democracy as the refuge of the weakling, denounced Christianity as a system calculated to make degenerates out of men, denied the existence of God, overturned all standards of morality, eulogized war as both necessary and desirable,⁶⁸ praised hatred because it leads to war, denied to sympathy and pity any rightful place in a manly heart and endeavored to substitute the worship of the superman for the worship of Jehovah.”⁶⁹ Nietzsche abhorred egalitarianism and considered the masses as “flies in the market-place. It thus behooves the Superman and him who loves the Superman to leave the market-place and find himself a higher sphere. May those who can, rise, and in the struggle let the strongest survive; only thus can weakness be done away with!”⁷⁰ Clearly Nietzsche’s appeal was to the central Darwinian tenet: survival of the fittest, as he proclaims: “I am not my brother’s keeper. Let us have the struggle and the combat. Then the weak will die...”⁷¹

Bryan and McPherson found the humanitarian implications of this perspective egregiously opposed to Christian principles of equality and charity. “Devoted to reform, Bryan was disconcerted about the lack of reform possibilities in his understanding of evolution. For Bryan, evolution limited social improvements to the same gradual, slow developments that characterized the changes in organic species in nature. Humans were thus unable to do anything toward reform, no matter how devoted they might be to Christian actions and principles.”⁷²

Equally committed to social reform, McPherson protests that eugenics will not ensure a perfect race. In fact, she asserts that God had demonstrated the inefficacy of eugenics when he

⁶⁸ William Jennings Bryan, *Seven Questions in Dispute*, (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 146.

⁶⁹ George E. Webb, *The Evolution Controversy in America*, (University of Kentucky Press, 2002), 67.

⁷⁰ John M. Warbeke, “Friedrich Nietzsche, Antichrist, Superman, and Pragmatist,” *Harvard Theological Review*, 366-385, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Jul., 1909), Cambridge University Press, 371.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 371.

⁷² George E. Webb, *The Evolution Controversy*, 68.

selected a wife for Abraham's son, Isaac, the "loveliest maiden he could find... What was the result? A blind father could not tell his son's skin from the skin of a goat, blind and old, with a son as crooked as he could be."⁷³

McPherson moves from eugenics and continues her remonstrance by addressing Socialism as a means of creating equality and education as a means of human reform, countering that social reform must come from Jesus Christ alone. Then, employing her signature rhetorical style, she illustrates these points concerning social reform with a series of homespun vignettes. She begins with a story about a woman who stood watching great ocean waves roll in and was asked why she had tears rolling down her cheeks. "'Oh, thank God for something there is enough of.' It was the first thing she had ever seen in her life that there was enough of for she had lived in very straightened circumstances all her life." Next, she tells the story of a destitute "tramp" who had asked for a dime. "Oh! Let us live no longer in penury. The Father with His great, throbbing heart, is waiting just now. The Father, with open arms is saying, 'Come!' to a wayward world. 'Bring me your problems,' He is saying. 'Bring me your need. Bring me your hunger. Bring me your disease. Bring me yourself, just as you are.'" What seems abundantly clear from the linkage of these illustrative vignettes to the issues of eugenics, etc., is that McPherson considered social reform to include all aspects of human need, including hunger, poverty, immorality, racism, and the need for social uplift among them, and that she considered eugenics an ineffective method of producing social change. In her own thinking, her crusade against modernism and evolution were integrally woven into her advocacy for the poor, needy, and disenfranchised.

⁷³ Aimee Semple McPherson, "God the Father," *The Bridal Call Foursquare*, (September 1927), 28.

Those who sat in her classrooms at L.I.F.E. Bible School noted her depth of understanding of these popular theories. “Nathaniel Van Cleave, not an unimportant theologian, sat in Sister Aimee’s class in the 1930’s. He recalls her vast knowledge of Church history and doctrine. . . .but for now it must be said that she understood the religious controversies of her time and would not waste a minute on academic trifles.”⁷⁴

McPherson writes of her interest in the evolution debate beginning in her childhood and often describes her advent into Darwinism as playing an integral role in her early formation. As a 13-year old she was already in demand as a public speaker. In High School, she became a devoted student of Darwin's theory of evolution. She made her knowledge public by writing articles in newspapers. At 17-years-of-age, McPherson had grown up as a somewhat pampered and headstrong child, the only offspring of her mother, Minnie, and the aging James Kennedy. Although their Canadian farm presented a great deal of work, it also provided some degree of security, privilege, and comfort with respect to the tiny, rural community’s economy. Aimee enjoyed performing plays, presenting speeches, and soon distinguished herself as a bright and gifted young elocutionist. To her parent’s deep dismay, she toyed with philosophical concepts of evolution, Darwinism, and other non-orthodox beliefs that were blanketing the North Atlantic region. In fact, on one occasion she cornered her pastor and pelted him with well-prepared questions he could not answer, making him look foolish and embarrassing her parents.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Daniel Mark Epstein, *Sister Aimee: The Life of Aimee Semple McPherson*, (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), 361.

⁷⁵ Daniel Mark Epstein, *Sister Aimee, The Life of Aimee Semple McPherson*, (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), 41.; See also: Aimee Semple McPherson, *This Is That, Personal Experiences, Sermons and Writings of Aimee Semple McPherson, Evangelist*, (Los Angeles: Echo Park Evangelistic Association, Inc., Nov. 28, 1923), 52.

In *Bridal Call* September 7, 1924, William Jennings Bryan, a frequent guest speaker at Angeles Temple, lays out a 12-page article outlining the Darwinian debate. Such examples clearly indicate that McPherson was well acquainted with the full scope of the debate as well as the implications involved and was outspoken in her efforts against them.

It would seem that few in this era were unacquainted with the debate. A random search of local newspapers in numerous states easily finds eugenics clubs, meetings, and debates sprinkled amongst ads, recipes, sermons, and the other folksy fodder supplied to communities in these pages.⁷⁶

McPherson, Defiance, and Racism

It seems clear that Darwinism, deeply conflated at the time with Social Darwinism and eugenics, struck at the heart of McPherson's brand of Pentecostalism, which was initially rooted in the social gospel precedents of the Salvation Army. Built on a bedrock of "survival of the fittest" that separated the races and consigned non-Nordic peoples to inferior and defective status, "God or Gorilla?" McPherson's stand against the giant King Kong, symbolized a defiance against forces of deception that would oppose the masses.

From the earliest days of her ministry, she championed the equality of races and boasted that she had held the first racially integrated services in the Deep South. McPherson preached to black audiences and white, poor farmers, and factory workers, as well as wealthy

⁷⁶ See *Chillicothe Morning Constitution* (Chillicothe MO) April 9, 1915, 4; *Coshocton Tribune* (Coshocton, OH) November 10, 1928, 2; *The Lincoln Daily Star* (Lincoln NE) January 1, 1914, 10; *Herald* (Arlington Heights, IL) January 24, 1930, 13; *Syracuse Herald* (Syracuse, NY) December 22, 1913, 17; *Albuquerque Journal* (Albuquerque, NM), March 23, 1934, 12; *Sioux County Index* (Hull, IA, February 29, 1924; *The Washington Post* (Wash DC), May 30, 1915; *Sheboygan Press* (Sheboygan, WI) February 10, 1925; *The Helena Independent* (Helena, MT), July 27, 1930; *Reno Evening Gazette* (Reno, NV) April 27, 1926; *The Marion Daily Star* (Marion, OH) December 4, 1912.

and respected townsfolk alike. Traveling through the Deep South, she and her children slept by the roadside. McPherson was deeply stirred by the warm reception of black workers in the cotton and tobacco fields who were grateful to hear the Word preached, having been shut out of nearby churches. “She visited their homes and found herself at ease with the poor blacks, being near as poor as any of them.”⁷⁷

This defiance of racial barriers and social class distinctions is one of the most remarkable features of McPherson’s early ministry. The black community loved her and she loved them. She wrote, “It was about impossible for me to pass one of them on the street without such floods of love welling up in my heart...I think they must have felt my love for them, for they flocked about me while distributing tracts in their neighborhoods.”⁷⁸ Harvey Cox noted McPherson’s commitment to racial inclusion: “From the earliest days of her barnstorming, Sister Aimee had always insisted that the coming together of races was one the surest signs of the presence of the Spirit.”⁷⁹

McPherson held a camp meeting in an African-American community at Key West and found that it was “impossible to keep the white people away. So for the first time in the Island the white and colored attended the same place of worship and glorified the same Lord side by side.”⁸⁰ In such transcendence we witness in McPherson the racial egalitarianism that distinguished the early Azusa mission. She wrote: “The poor and despised are having the

⁷⁷ Epstein, 126.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 128.

⁷⁹ Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven, The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century*, (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995), 126.

⁸⁰ McPherson, *This Is That*, 118-119.

gospel preached unto them, and God is honoring His own Word in simplicity, but in demonstration and power with signs following.”⁸¹

Very early on, Pentecostalism abandoned its initial commitment to “wash away the color line in the blood.”⁸² Fueled by the rising racism of the Social Darwinism widely taught in public schools and in the public square, the nation as a whole became increasingly segregated. Despite the social pressure, McPherson—who over the years changed dramatically in many ways, exchanging the strict, matronly dress of her early Holiness roots for bobbed hair, makeup, and a sleek, modern appearance—never abandoned her early racial egalitarianism or her commitment to the masses of the poor and disenfranchised. In the mid-1920’s as the first woman to be granted a broadcast license from the Federal Radio Commission, McPherson “envisioned this station as a vehicle for social revolution. She hoped that the radio might transcend the color and class line and transform Christianity.”⁸³ This vision was expressed in a poem she read on the air: “The Cathedral of the Air am I, the church with no boundary line. And under my broad, canopied expanse, I house the sons of men—the back, the white, the yellow; the brown and red man, too. Brothers all sit side by side, in the church with no color line. The rich and the poor, the old and the young...all worship at my [the radio’s] shrine.”⁸⁴

McPherson, Fundamentalism, and the Great Reversal

⁸¹ Ibid., 119.

⁸² Originally attributed to Frank Bartleman.

⁸³ Sutton, 80-81.

⁸⁴ “Radio Program,” *Bridal Call Foursquare* 7 (April 1924): Aimee Semple McPherson, “The Cathedral of the Air,” *Bridal Call Foursquare* 8 (June 1924), 4-5. See also, Sutton, 80-81.

The popularity of Social Darwinism and eugenics would help to exert a several-decades-long suppression of philanthropy among fundamentalists. At the turn of the century, the entire Christian community—conservatives as well as liberals—were very much invested in social issues. However, evangelicals and fundamentalists, who were largely followed by self-identifying conservative Pentecostals, reversed the trend of social involvement and began to isolate themselves from such concerns. “From approximately 1910 until the 1930s ... a major shift in the position of evangelicals on social issues occurred, a shift which historian Timothy L. Smith has termed ‘the Great Reversal’ in some of his lectures.”⁸⁵

Such shifts away from social concern appear to mirror growing pressure from eugenicists and Social Darwinists who considered philanthropy to be an impedance to the natural forces working to cleanse society of its misfits.⁸⁶ Educational reformer Franklin J. Bobbitt warned the nation against sinister social forces that were preventing the natural biological laws of “survival of the fittest” from assuring that “society’s best” would continue. He warned that “we’re now faced with civilization’s retrogressive policies. Our schools and our charities supply crutches to the weak in mind and morals [and thus] corrupt the steams of heredity which all admit are sufficiently turbid.”⁸⁷ The best strategy for “repression of the unfit,” according to Bobbitt, was the “abolition of public charities, public school systems and all other public agencies which go out of their way to preserve the weak and incapable.”⁸⁸

⁸⁵ David O. Moberg,, *The Great Reversal, Evangelism versus Social Concern, An Evangelical Perspective*, (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1972), 30.

⁸⁶ Steven Selden, *Inheriting Shame, The Story of Eugenics and Racism in America*, 41.

⁸⁷ See John Frank Bobbitt, “Practical Eugenics,” *Pedagogical Seminary*, 16, (1909), 385—394, 387. See also, *ibid.*, 41.

⁸⁸ Bobbitt, 393. See also, Selden, 42.

The outcry of eugenicists against social concerns continued as a major public school textbook theme throughout the era. By 1941, Michael F. Guyer's *Animal Biology*, observed that "the greatest danger to any democracy is that its abler members and less prolific types shall be swamped by the overproduction of inferior strains."⁸⁹ Listed as one of the nation's chief menaces was "an unwise charity which fosters the production of unfit strains."⁹⁰

Although once invested in philanthropy, Moody, whose Bible school would become a cornerstone of early fundamentalism, eventually considered the postmillennialism of social gospellers to be rank heresy. For Moody, the world was a sinking ship that was going down fast, and evangelism was a lifeboat to pull a few individuals out of the water. "Christians therefore should set their affections in a heavenly direction; home, food, clothes, health, and financial security would follow for those who would seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Poverty would be overcome when diligence would replace indolence."⁹¹ The premillennialism of early fundamentalists, far from merely a tenet of doctrine, formed the lens through which all other doctrine was viewed. John W. Primrose, reviewing A.J. Gordon's premillennial world view, said that premillennialism not only "made the entire system of belief Christocentric but also made the Second Advent its focal point: it seemed to suggest that premillennialism was the 'mountaintop from which the whole landscape of the gospel' was to be understood."⁹²

⁸⁹ Michael F. Guyer, *Animal Biology*, (NY: Harper & Brothers, 1941), 498.

⁹⁰ Ibid. 498.

⁹¹ Richard K. Curtis, *They Called Him Mister Moody*, (N.Y.: Doubleday, 1962), 266. See also, David O. Moberg, *The Great Reversal, Evangelism Versus Social Concern, An Evangelical Perspective*, (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1972), 32.

⁹² John W. Primrose, Review of A.J. Gordon, "The Ministry of the Spirit," *The Presbyterian Quarterly*, LL (October, 1897, 557); see also, Edith Lydia Waldvogel, unpub. Diss. Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 1977, 46.

Nevertheless, while Social Darwinists ridiculed those who helped the needy, social action continued to distinguish McPherson's defiant brand of Pentecostalism. According to Sutton, "Her early experience in the Salvation Army provided her with useful models for tireless and unreserved efforts among the destitute."⁹³ Passages of scripture that emphasized her praxis-oriented theology found a central place in her sermons throughout her career. The Angeles Temple Commissary was founded on the basis of James 1:27: "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and the widows in their affliction." As with the Salvation Army, philanthropic work and evangelism were conducted in a seamless endeavor. "Everything was done as a way of opening a door for evangelism. Along with the food brought to the home of the needy came a Bible and an invitation to visit a service at the Temple."⁹⁴

In 1931, investigative reporter Adele Rogers St. John for William Randolph Hearst's Herald Examiner went undercover as one of the destitute masses to examine first-hand the community and government response to the looming need. Dressed as unemployed worker May Harrison, and with no earthly goods beyond \$.10 in her pocket, St. John visited the city's charitable, religious, and social service agencies. She quickly discerned that corruption and indifference greeted the wretched minions. Red tape and bureaucratic layers made getting help all but impossible, causing St. John to proclaim to the public that conditions were worse than in California's most notorious prisons where inmates weren't treated as badly.⁹⁵ Few

⁹³ Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 62-63.

⁹⁴ Gregg Townsend, "The Material Dream of Aimee Semple McPherson: A Lesson in Pentecostal Spirituality," *PNEUMA*, Vol. 14, No. 2, Fall 1991, 173.

⁹⁵ Edith L. Blumhoffer, *Aimee Semple McPherson, Everybody's Sister*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 346-347.

religious organizations were rated better, except for the Angeles Temple under McPherson's benevolent leadership, of which St. John wrote:

I hadn't seen anyone passing out manna or offering any loaves and fishes, yes—take that back—I'd seen Aimee Semple McPherson, God bless her. Feeding, encouraging, giving hope, hope, hope to the poor, and faith and strength as they jammed Angelus Temple.⁹⁶

According to reports, McPherson begged her congregation for supplies and filled her own home and garage with them for the indigent. So responsive was the Temple that it was widely reported that police and firefighters depended more upon the Temple's feeding pantry than any social service agency in town, especially when the need was immediate.⁹⁷ The Commissary provided a food pantry, laundry, employment services, sewing rooms, and a free dining hall.⁹⁸

When an earthquake devastated Long Beach in 1934, McPherson's Mobile Unit appeared quickly with blankets, coffee, and donuts. The extent and success of such philanthropic ventures brought national attention to Angeles Temple, and officials approached McPherson for advice on organizing their own similar efforts.⁹⁹ McPherson's pioneering voice not only shaped Pentecostalism through her creative use of media, mass campaigns, and large, auditorium-style services, but she also steered the movement towards largely neglected issues of social justice. McPherson reached out to those who were socially broken, those marginalized and despised by society. "Her visits to the 'dives' and dance halls in Winnipeg, her foray into San Diego's boxing arena, the late-night hours she spent in the red light districts

⁹⁶ Ibid.,347.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 349.

of Denver all became part of the McPherson legend. The Denver Post wrote in 1921, that she did not condemn people, but, rather, “to this congregation of the abandoned, Aimee McPherson sang songs of hope in which they joined.”¹⁰⁰

For McPherson, ministry to the poor and needy was a practical expression of the *imitatio Christi*. In a talk given at a Bible conference entitled “Christ Our Example,” McPherson explained her perception of the *imitatio Christi* using the language of the Holiness Movement’s perfectionism: “Once you get Jesus in your heart you can’t help living as He lives, for He will live out His life in you. The standard of God’s Word declares that—‘As He is, so are we.’” In this view, we are not really imitating Christ at all. Rather, “He wants us to be a reproduction, a reincarnation, Christ formed in us, living His life, demonstrating Himself through His people to a dying world.”¹⁰¹ The practical expression of that life, in McPherson’s perspective, was “Christian sympathy for humanity.” She said, “Jesus mingled with the people. The little babes cuddled up on His knee and never cried. Mothers and servants, lepers, and poor, fallen, bruised, broken women could creep up on Him and not be afraid of being put away.”¹⁰²

Conclusion

Michael J. Hostetler writes that “rather than ending the conflict between evolution and its foes, the Scopes Trial was one of the early battles in the ongoing culture war.”¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Edith L. Blumhofer, “Reflections on the Source of Aimee Semple McPherson’s Voice,” 24.

¹⁰¹ McPherson, “Christ Our Example,” *The Bridal Call*, (Feb. 1922), 15; Gregg Townsend, “The Material Dream of Aimee Semple McPherson: A Lesson in Pentecostal Spirituality,” *PNEUMA*, Vol. 14, No. 2, Fall 1991, 173.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁰³ Michael J. Hostetler, “William Jennings Bryan as Demosthenes: The Scopes Trial and the Undelivered Oration, *On Evolution*,” *Western Journal of Communication*, 62 (2) (Spring 1998), 165-180, 165.

Reflecting on this complicated and important era provides many insights into our own cultural divide.

The Scopes Monkey Trial formed one of the watershed events of the time, but to fully understand the work of Pentecostal leaders such as McPherson and Bryan, our scholarship must appreciate the complicated and nuanced dance that these ancestors entered into during the Progressive Era. McPherson, Bryan, and others reacted to and resisted Darwinism in no small part because of its popular social theory component linked to eugenics. Rooted in notions of biological superiority and ‘survival of the fittest,’ Darwinism stood in dynamic contradiction to McPherson’s Pentecostal social gospel, which was a practical expression of the *imitatio Christi*.

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