



RELIGIOUS PROGRESSIVISM AND THE WISCONSIN IDEA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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I have the University of Wisconsin in my blood. My dad was on the law faculty, and my grandparents were both in the economics department. The University of Wisconsin, and the Wisconsin Idea, with its emphasis on research, service and progressive legislation was the way I understood the value of the academy. I have spent much of my vocation as a religious leader in educational settings, finding them a crucial place for combining the head, the heart and the spirit.

The crucial torch of the Wisconsin Idea blends a spiritual vision with scholastic rigor to create a better world.

In order to talk about the Wisconsin Idea and religious progressivism we need to go back more than a century and invoke the spirit of some pioneers at the University of Wisconsin whose legacy we have inherited.

Most people who have been in Madison have probably trudged up and down Bascom Hill and perhaps had reason to enter Bascom Hall, but how many know the history of the man that the hill and the hall were named after?

John Bascom was born in 1827. He attended Williams College went to Auburn Seminary – where I now serve – and ultimately graduated from Andover Newton Seminary. He taught at Williams until being called to be the University of Wisconsin as the Fifth President in 1874.

Bascom was an early proponent of the Social Gospel, the major progressive Christian movement of the late 19th and early 20th, of which my great-grandfather Walter Rauschenbusch was also a part. One of the foundational ideas behind the Social Gospel is that the kingdom of God, or Heaven, or Righteousness was to come, as we pray in the Lord's Prayer, on earth realized here among us. As Rauschenbusch wrote: **The kingdom of God is not a matter of getting individuals into heaven, but transforming the life on earth into the harmony of heaven.**

One of the most important factors in Bascom's social gospel worldview was that science was to be embraced by Christians including evolution. He wrote a book called: Evolution and Religion that articulate how academic study was joined with spiritual commitment in service of the reign of justice on earth as in heaven. As Bascom wrote: **We see the Kingdom of heaven coming along these very lines of union between scientific research and religious insight"**

Bascom brought this vision to University of Wisconsin. For Bascom, the intellectual and spiritual rigor found in the university made it one the most important locations for realizing the vision of heaven on earth full of justice and equality that God desires.

Bascom's social gospel influence led to his promotion of the voting rights for women, and for the inclusion of women students at the University of Wisconsin Law School, with the first woman graduating in 1885. This would have a major role to play in my own family history as my grandmother came to Wisconsin to study law just a few decades later.

He also promoted the rights of labor to organize, believing that the evolution's evil twin of social Darwinism was allowing the heads of businesses to amass huge wealth while workers remained in poverty. As a Christian, Bascom rejected the gospel of wealth that was popular at the time, which argued that Jesus rewarded faith with money and power.

By fashioning the university as a place of service, and an active participant in realizing a more just world, Bascom laid the foundation for what was to become known as the Wisconsin idea. Yet it was two students who were greatly influenced by Bascom, both graduates of the class of 1879, who made the Wisconsin idea famous. The future Senator and Governor of Wisconsin Robert La Follette and future University of Wisconsin president Charles Van Hise worked closely together to further the ideas and vision of President Bascom.

Having received the first Ph.D. in geology at Wisconsin, Van Hise immediately joined the faculty and in 1903 became the President of University of Wisconsin where he served for the next fifteen years. In a speech in 1905, Van Hise laid out the basic outline of the Wisconsin idea, proclaiming: **“I shall never be content until the beneficent influence of the University reaches every family of the state.”**

President Van Hise made good on that promise in concrete ways. During his tenure the University developed the Extension Program that offered summer courses and other opportunities for learning to any citizen in the state — believing that education for all the people was crucial for building a more just and inclusive society, and this program continues to this day.

The term “Wisconsin Idea” became coined in 1912 when Charles McCarthy, wrote a book about the effects of the Legislative Reference Library called The Wisconsin Idea.

The Library’s mission was to make sure that up-to-date and excellent research was made available by University of Wisconsin faculty to legislators in the capital, so that when crafting new bills they would have the latest facts and best knowledge with which to make decisions on laws that would benefit the public.

The forward to The Wisconsin Idea book was written by President Theodore Roosevelt who wrote: **“Wisconsin has become literally a laboratory for wise experimental legislation aiming to secure the social and political betterment of the people as a whole.”**

Another integral part of the Wisconsin idea was the Social Center Movement, which created common spaces where people could meet, socialize and discuss the care and well being of their own community. In some ways these were like town hall meetings but with more frequency.

In this effort there were echoes of the Settlement Movements that was happening in New York and Chicago and other places around the country where university faculty and students would go and attempt to find ways life uplift poor and or immigrant communities. What made the Social Center Movement different was the idea of us-lift as opposed to uplift. That it was not the nobles oblige of the privileged reaching a hand down to the poor, but rather the approach was from a place of equal citizenship and egalitarian values.

I want to mention two other men who were present during this time and who are deeply associated with the Wisconsin Idea: Richard Ely and John Commons. Ely was the founder and the first Secretary of the **American Economic Association** as well as the founder of the **Christian Social Union** advocating the application of **Christian** principles to the social problems of the world.[5].

During the 1880s and 1890s, he provided an important bridge between theological and economic inquiry and was considered by some to be as much of a preacher as an economist admitting that he was attempting to answer the question: **'What will constitute a kingdom of righteousness'**

In 1889 Ely wrote a book "The Social Aspects of Christianity and other Essays" in which he wrote: **"Christianity is primarily concerned with this world, and it is the mission of Christianity to bring to pass here a kingdom of righteousness.** Ely emphasized the Second Great commandment – to love our neighbors as our selves saying: **"To love your fellow man means to help him, to lift him up in a tangible, measurable, earthly, verifiable, palpable, and effective way. If he is sick, hungry, cold, and ignorant, then he must be healed, fed, clothed, and educated.**[18] and here he called upon the university and the state to help in this task: As Ely puts it, **"[T]he second commandment...in its elaboration, becomes social science or sociology."**[19]

Continuing the tradition of President Bascom, Ely believed that the state universities would become the new locus of social transformation along a Christian lines and specifically advocated for the forming of Christian associations like this one to join the religious endeavor to the social sciences and to government.

In 1892, Ely was recruited to the University of Wisconsin to become the director of the economics, history and political science departments. In 1904, Ely invited John Commons his former student at Johns Hopkins to the economics department at Wisconsin.

Commons also was influenced by the Social Gospel and was the founder of the American Institute for Christian Sociology, and authored a book in 1894 called *Social Reform and the Church*.^[13] Both Ely and Commons were inspired by the social gospel's vision of a world that was meant to reflect justice and equity and that all parts of society were needed to realize that vision. However, both of them increasingly saw that the university had a specific and primary role to play.

As Ely declared **“industrialization has brought to the front a vast number of social problems whose solution is impossible without the united efforts of church, state, and science.”** The University of Wisconsin, with the Academy at one end of the street and state government at the other was the perfect place to enact this vision.

The social gospel and the progressive movement in general is viewed as reaching its peak in the years just proceeding World War One with its optimism for the future crashing into that great wall of war and destruction. Unfortunately, at Wisconsin the war pitted many of these friends against one another, as La Follette vehemently opposed the war, with Ely and Commons denouncing him as traitorous.

In Wisconsin, a conservative governor was elected to replace La Follette and a backlash against the Progressives began. I add this not to show that they failed — because there are more chapters to this story — but to remind us that history is not linear. And the great moral arc of the universe that bends towards justice is clearly has more jagged detours than we would like.

As a promised postscript, I will say that it was in the decade after World War I and several years of conservatives in power, that my grandparents both came to the University.

My grandfather, Paul Raushenbush, whose father was Walter Rauschenbusch came specifically to work with John Commons in the economics department. My grandmother, Elizabeth Brandeis, came to Wisconsin to attend the law school that had been made co-ed by John Bascom, because none of the east coast schools were accepting women, even though her father was one of America's most famous lawyers and eventually a Supreme Court justice. My grandparents met in a law school class that my grandfather was sitting in on and he convinced her to come over to the economics department. Together with John Commons, another economics professor Harold Groves, and the new progressive Governor Phillip La Follette, son of Robert La Follette they developed the research for the first Unemployment Compensation legislation in the country which was replicated across the nation and has saved many from economically falling through the cracks between jobs.

My grandmother, who was one of the only full female professors in the Economics department also focused her work on immigrant labor in the state and affected legislation that required proper housing and schools for that vulnerable population.

My grandparents and the La Follettes along with Commons and others were involved in much of the legislation that became The New Deal that provided a safety net for the most vulnerable in our society. I provide, what may feel like an obscure history as a conversation starter for our current moment that requires all the resources harnessed within the Wisconsin Idea.

Because we are in another moment of National Crisis and we do need inspiration. We are more polarized as a nation than I can ever remember. We are plagued by the twin evils of hate and fear, combined with violent rhetoric that threatens to fracture our society. We distrust and demonize one another and point fingers instead of extending a hand. Young black lives are criminalized, immigrant families are ripped apart and rounded up, refugees seeking a better life are banned based on religion, women continue to be subject to violence and denigration, suicide rates are spiking among working class whites, LGBT lives are trivialized, debated and legislated against, people of other faiths are targeted and demeaned, anti-Semitism is surging, millions are at risk of losing their healthcare and a budget was released today that builds up weapons and pays for them by cutting services to the poor, while income inequality is worse than it has been since the Wisconsin idea was first launched. We find ourselves constantly, intentionally pitted 'us vs them' and forget that there is 'we the people'.

Yet perhaps it was just for such a time as this that we were made, each of us have a crucial role to play in the response. And I believe that those pioneers of the Wisconsin idea have some lessons to teach us.

I want to start with perhaps the most important lesson that President Van Hise offers those of us at the university and those of us who proclaim a religious faith.

In 1913, Van Hise told a contingent of visitors from Philadelphia who were interested in the Wisconsin idea that the university has the duty to seek truth and advance knowledge, and in doing so it is important to remember QUOTE **“that knowledge is nowhere fixed, that all things are fluid. The ideas that we hold today will not be held tomorrow in precisely the same form. Nowhere is there a fixity or completeness in regard to human relations any more than with regard to physical or chemical relations. Just as the spirit of authority represses or destroys university, so the spirit of freedom creates and inspires them.** [1]

So it is inspired by that spirit of freedom that we look back at these Wisconsin pioneers, understanding that, with their blessing, our conversation will extend out in directions they might never have imagined. The founders of the Wisconsin idea were progressives in politics and in their faith. And Christianity at its core is a progressive faith. We do not believe that Jesus is behind us holding us back; rather Jesus continues to call us forward, to follow in the way, and to midwife what Dr. King called “The beloved community.”

So, in the progressive spirit, let us look at the Wisconsin idea to inspire us forward in this crucial moment.

The first important principle of the Wisconsin Idea is that it is driven by vision. As is said in the book of Proverbs: **“Where there is no vision, the people perish.”** The vision of the early advocates of the Wisconsin Idea was inspired by the Christian vision of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth where justice and peace reigned. While this became less explicitly religious in subsequent generations it still was a vision marked by justice, equality, dignity and liberty for all no matter what religion, race, nationality, gender or sexuality.

In today's America there is a very different vision that is competing with this inclusive and just legacy. To our great lament it is driven by our Christian co-religionists. White Evangelical Christians voted for Trump in huge numbers in a large part because they were fearful that they were 'losing' their country and they placed whiteness and nationalism over the Gospel. One of the most important task before us is to come up with a vision for Wisconsin and for the nation that is inclusive of all people and is more compelling than the one that is in power today. What world are we dreaming of and how can we invite everyone to share this dream?

The second important principle of the Wisconsin Idea that I want to lift up is the emphasis on good information and facts when designing legislation. That was the main purpose of the Legislative Reference Library. Yet, today we are living in what has been called a "post-truth" world. But this is just a way of obscuring and distracting. Facts do exist and they matter. The very reason that Universities exist is to generate and share knowledge and to seek new information to address the questions and challenges that are in front of us.

This is true for faith as well. Faith is only as alive as it interacts with new scientific facts, artistic wisdom and cultural knowledge.

But unfortunately, the American President dismisses facts that are not friendly as fake. And Wisconsin's most well known representative is unwilling to engage with the fact that his health care bill will cause 20 million Americans to lose their coverage.

Now that is not to say that there should not be healthy disagreement in order to develop the best possible legislation. But the university must continue to proclaim that research matters and to provide the best possible resources for such conversations. The Wisconsin idea was ultimately meant to provide the information and knowledge that could inspire solutions that benefited the entire community. We need that today more than ever. And Universities must take the role of active resistance to the denigration of knowledge.

The third principle of the Wisconsin idea that I want to highlight is the principle of us-lift as exemplified by the Social Center Movement. I would love to hear about places where courageous conversations are happening across Wisconsin with the idea that each person might be invested in the collective well being, and that all citizens might come together to find a way forward together.

And the final principle that the early social gospel pioneers of the Wisconsin Idea would want us to carry forward is that every part of our study can be understood as in the service of beloved community. Whether the arts, economics, law, medicine, whatever we feel called to — know that it is of value and can be applied to the great work of liberation and justice for all the people.

I want to close with these words from Fighting Bob La Follette from “the Goals of the Progressive:

“The battle is just on. It is young yet. It will be the longest and hardest ever fought for Democracy. In other lands, the people have lost. Here we shall win. It is a glorious privilege to live in this time, and to have a free hand in this fight for government by the people.” (17)

The battle continues. It is our time.

Limited bibliography

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[1] [1]From John Bascom and the origins of the Wisconsin idea.

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