

The Impossibility of Complacency: Scripture in the Life and Work of Jane Addams

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ABSTRACT: Though her written work focuses on social and political philosophy and policy, Jane Addams' religious faith informed and motivated every social and political act she made. Instead of advocating a particular theology or aligning with a particular denomination, Addams came by her faith somewhat organically, gradually, and privately. Daughter of a perfectionist Christian father and deeply rooted in nondenominational evangelical Christianity, Jane Addams developed a keen awareness of the value, power, and lived experience of a deep faith – all the while maintaining the attitude of a spiritual seeker with a virulent discomfort with conformity. Through her experiences in college and travels abroad, Addams struggled with her own religious identity and initially rejected Christianity. Yet, with constant concern for her own moral state and a desire to develop a meaningful vocation, Addams' early writings suggest an early and constant concern for women and the poor as well as a persistent quest for her own religious truth. Persuaded by the writings of Thomas Carlyle and Leo Tolstoy to explore the Bible as a source for this truth, Addams drew inspiration primarily from the gospels generally and Matthew's account of the beatitudes specifically. For Addams, the Bible provided the inspiration for her life of service and a guide for how best to live the vocation for which she was destined – a vocation that, whether serving the needy at Hull House or speaking at international women's conferences, required a deep, humble, and persistent concern for the poor and disadvantaged.

In her memoir, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, Jane Addams (1860-1935) writes, “[A]ction is the only medium man has for receiving and appropriating truth.”¹ Her life was one of action, and, thus, her truth can only be understood through that lens. Chronicling her work in founding social work as a profession, writing and lobbying on issues of international peace, domestic poverty, and human rights, and winning the Nobel Peace Prize, biographies and history books describe Jane Addams's tireless activism for the poor and eloquent appeals for world peace. Biographers describe her as both a product of her time and uniquely influential in the field of social work and in theorizing and advocating a robust and just democracy within and outside American borders. As a social activist of faith in the early 20th century, Addams's work also reflects the Social Gospel movement's emphasis on emulating the example of Jesus and directly working to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth. As some have argued, her unique contribution to political philosophy comes from the marrying of pragmatism with progressivism.²

While biographers have labeled Addams an activist, a reformer, a social worker, and even a political philosopher, they seldom speak of her as a theologian or scriptural interpreter. Indeed,

¹ Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House with Autobiographical Notes* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1945), 122.

² For a discussion of the pragmatist spirit of Addams's work, see Erik Schneiderhan, “Pragmatism and Empirical Sociology: the Case of Jane Addams and Hull-House, 1889-1895,” *Theoretical Sociology* 40 (2011): 589-617. For a discussion of the blending of pragmatism and progressivism, see Chris Belton, “Knowing Her Place: Jane Addams, Pragmatism and Cultural Policy,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 12, no. 2 (2006): 135-150.

Addams rarely mentioned scripture or her own faith directly in her public speeches and written work. However, her personal correspondence demonstrates that beneath the surface of her theories of democracy and activism lies a conflicted but passionate faith. Her autobiographical work demonstrates this faith more directly. Daughter of a perfectionist Christian father and educated at Rockford Female Seminary, Addams was deeply informed by religion during her formative years. Though she often questioned her faith, her difficult childhood and constant self-inquiry led to the development of a unique and individualized spirituality that directed her future work.³ Her faith occupied her mind constantly, but she consistently hesitated to speak directly about it or affirm a particular religious identity. In a letter to her dear friend Ellen Gates Starr on August 11, 1879, nineteen-year-old Addams wrote, “Every time I talk about religion, I vow a great vow never to do it again. I find myself growing indignant and sensitive when people speak of it lightly as if they had no right to, you see I am so *unsettled*, as I *resettle* so often, but my creed is ever *be sincere* and don’t fuss”.⁴

Coming of age in the midst of the Catholic and Protestant Social Gospel movements, Addams found her own path amidst a sea of theological voices focused on putting faith into action and following Jesus’ example in word and deed to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth. Addams’s reading of scripture resonates directly with her intellectual influences and with other Social Gospellers. Her unique perspective comes from her particular background, her own existential anxiety, and her persistence. As a woman, Addams was socialized to be self-sacrificing and to accept suffering as part and parcel of a life well lived. While hesitant to quote scripture, affiliate denominationally, or speak openly about her faith, Addams’s political, social, and religious actions in the world were deeply influenced by her very particular reading of scripture and by the unsettledness and anxiety that it brought – an anxiety also influenced by her upbringing. This anxiety was the fuel for action, and though she never felt settled in terms of her own spiritual state, it was clear to her that inaction was never an option. Through attention to her background and the references to scripture found in her letters, journals, and published writing, a clear and simple theology emerges.

While Addams’s biography and political theory are well-worn territory, this article focuses on the ways in which scripture informed and populated the very personal spirituality, the “truth,” that directed and motivated Addams’s action in the world. After a brief discussion of the existential anxiety and quest brought about by her early life circumstances, the article touches on three scriptural passages that were deeply influential to Addams and formed the basis for her own activism and her public democratic theory. Coming to these passages through intellectual influences such as Thomas Carlyle and Leo Tolstoy, Addams wrestled with the textual meaning and internalized their messages in important ways. Seen together, these three passages illuminate a comprehensive personal theology which was never clearly articulated yet which illuminates the religious underpinnings of her seemingly secular propositions. Revealing her theological voice in this way provides an illuminating window into her considerable body of work while also revealing

³ Victoria Bissell Brown, *The Education of Jane Addams* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). Brown traces the development of this spirituality through Addams’s childhood and through her first encounters with the poor in Baltimore and later in Europe. These personal encounters, Brown argues, were the catalysts for Addams’s spiritual development and, eventually, the development of her particular understanding of democracy and peace.

⁴ Jane Addams, “To Ellen Gates Starr, Cedarville, Ill., Aug. 11, 1879,” *The Selected Papers of Jane Addams, Vol. 1: Preparing to Lead, 1860-81*, ed. Mary Lynne McCree Bryan, Barbara Bair and Maree de Angury (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 286. Emphasis original.

the often subtle and private but centrally important ways in which scripture can inform the work of extraordinary individuals like Jane Addams.

Sewing the Seeds of Theological Anxiety

Jane Addams self-consciously acknowledged the role of her early life events in shaping her later personality and vocation. She introduces her autobiography, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, with “the theory that our genuine impulses may be connected with our childish experiences, that one’s bent may be tracked back to that ‘No Man’s Land’ where character is formless but nevertheless setting into definite lines of future development.”⁵ In her early life, that bent was shaped by privilege and loss. Addams lost her mother as a baby, and her father raised her exclusively until he remarried when Addams was eight years old. In her writings, Addams notes the presence of death in her early life – not only her mother’s death, but also the stark reality of the Civil War and Lincoln’s assassination when she was merely four years old. Addams points to Lincoln’s assassination as her entrée into world affairs.⁶ The reality of his death was later complicated by her great respect for Lincoln as a leader. Writing of his influence, she posits, “In the unceasing ebb and flow of justice and oppression we must all dig channels as best we may, that at the propitious moment somewhat of the swelling tide may be conducted to the barren places of life.”⁷ For Addams, Lincoln stood as living proof that democracy was the greatest contribution of the United States to “the moral life of the world.”⁸

In her childhood, Addams’s father was her strongest intellectual and spiritual influence. Addams looked to the charismatic and vivacious model of her father for parental support and religious guidance. Raised an evangelical Christian, Addams internalized her father’s visceral discomfort with denominational labels coupled with his deep concern for spiritual and religious inquiry. Her father’s resistance to denominational boundaries allowed Addams the freedom to pursue religious truth independent from a particular doctrine or ritual structure. However, this freedom, when combined with a deep religious faith, meant a life of constant struggle and searching. In a letter to her friend, struggling to articulate her own faith, a young Addams wrote:

This is where I think we differ – you long for a beautiful faith an experience of this kind – I only feel I need religion in a practical sense, that if I could fix myself with my relations to God and the universe, and so be in perfect harmony with nature and duty, I could use my faculties and energy so much better and could do almost anything.⁹

Institutional religion was not necessary for and, in fact, often inhibited the real work of Christianity. Faith was about relationship with God and orienting oneself to make that relationship

⁵ Addams, *Hull House*, 1.

⁶ Addams, *Hull House*, 23.

⁷ Addams, *Hull House*, 40.

⁸ Addams, *Hull House*, 42.

⁹ Addams, “To Ellen Gates Starr, Rockford Sem’y [Ill.], Jan. 29, 1880,” *Selected Papers*, Vol. 1, 334.

proper, whole, and sustaining. This generalized faith helps to explain the lack of specific scriptural reference in Addams' written work and public addresses. She resisted the urge to find a particular proof text in scripture to direct her life's work.

The unsettledness that characterizes Addams's faith emerged as a result of both her father's nonconformity and Addams's life experience. Biographer Louise Knight points to these early experiences of loss and recovery as central to Addams' later philosophy. These deaths, Knight argues, gave her a sense of urgency about life and a fear of dying before having realized her life's purpose.¹⁰ The anxiety brought about by this vocational question increased under the influence of her overbearing and inconstant step-mother and was complicated by the expectations placed on Addams to be a self-sacrificing woman. Addams combined these impulses into what became an almost obsessive quest for personal betterment through an almost masochistic embrace of suffering. Through her experiences in college and travels abroad, Addams struggled with her own religious identity and rejected Christianity. Yet, with constant concern for her own moral state and a desire to develop a meaningful vocation, Addams's early writings suggest an early and constant concern for women and the poor and a persistence to find her own religious truth.

As she reached college age, Addams longed for the opportunity to strike out on her own and further her intellectual journey, independent from religious institutions and independent of her father. Though she longed to attend Smith College, Addams attended Rockford Female Seminary and graduated in 1881. Her father mandated this choice, in large part because it enabled Addams to remain involved in family life and to attend to family needs when necessary. Though it was not the education she desired, this institutionalized study of religion gave Addams a foundation of religious literacy and also stoked the doubts and questions planted long ago. Sustained study of scripture and exposure to literary greats such as Leo Tolstoy and Thomas Carlyle infused her reading and internalization of scripture, as well as provided her with the tools to translate those texts into action within the real world.

Even as Addams's religious faith was driven by an anxiety about finding purpose and living righteously without conforming to a preordained system, she found great comfort in her faith as well. Though Addams rarely referenced the Hebrew Scriptures in her personal letters or public writings, the promise of Psalm 23:1-3 seems to have strengthened Addams throughout the searching, questioning, and doubting that characterized her teen years. Addams writes to Ellen Gates Starr in 1880, "If I could claim one promise in the Bible I would care for no other – 'He restores my soul.' Carlyle says every-one must sooner or later find out it is not with *work* alone he must contend but with folly and sin in himself and others."¹¹ Addams's own existential anxiety about finding life's purpose, combined with a growing awareness of the injustices present in the world and a theology of action and personal betterment, drove her onward as she contemplated her own life's work and purpose. With the Lord as her "shepherd," Addams pushed forward to find her path.

In mapping out the content of that vocation, Addams almost exclusively turned to the life and words of Jesus Christ. Addams recalls early Sunday morning scripture study at Rockford, where a Greek teacher would lead the students in translating the Gospels from their original Greek.

¹⁰ Louise W. Knight, *Jane Addams: Spirit in Action* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010), 8.

¹¹ Jane Addams, "To Ellen Gates Starr, Rockford Sem'y [Ill.], Jan. 29, 1880," *Selected Readings, Vol. 1*, 335. Emphasis original.

This practice, Addams once wrote, made them feel as though “the disputatious Paul had not yet been.”¹² In discussing her most sustained study of the Gospels in seminary, she describes how this experience gave her “a lifelong enthusiasm for reading the Gospels in bulk, a whole one at a time, and an insurmountable distaste for having them cut up into chapter and verse, or hearing the incidents in that wonderful life thus referred to as if it were merely a record.”¹³ Throughout her life, Addams had little interest in Paul’s letters and spent little time concerned about the salvific role of Jesus Christ. Paul’s soteriological interpretation of Jesus’ life and teachings concerned her much less than how the very existence of Jesus and the power of his teachings ought to direct her own life.¹⁴ The emphasis in her biblical study and resultant theology was the here and now, rather than the life to come.

Her pragmatic approach to scripture, combined with the anxiety cultivated in her childhood, gave her both freedom and deep responsibility as she searched for her own vocation. Social Gospelers such as Horace Bushnell (1802-1876) informed Addams’s approach to the Christian faith. As a young woman at Rockford, Addams contemplated the divinity of Jesus and pointed to Bushnell’s discussion of Jesus as resonant with her own understanding. Frustrated with the limits that her father placed on her education and feeling stifled by the evangelical and staid curriculum and ideology of Rockford, Addams consistently pushed the limits of orthodoxy and challenged authority in many ways. Influenced by Margaret Fuller’s *Women in the 19th Century*, Addams read into the Bible the full possibility of women’s success and influence in the world.¹⁵ Taking biblical interpretation into her own hands and taking seriously the calls of Jesus for a life of service and suffering also meant a life of continual self-reflection, self-doubt, and action above all else.

Taking up the Cross

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life. (Matthew 16:24-26)

Addams rarely referenced scripture directly in her public writings and was prone to take the whole of the scripture as an influence, rather than chapter and verse. However, certain verses resonate strongly in her personal writings and clearly influence the tone and focus of her outward work and published writings. The strongest scriptural influences fall directly in line with the Social Gospel mentality of the time. A focus on Jesus as someone to be emulated as an aspirational model rather than as savior suggests a preoccupation with the actions and words of Jesus himself. With notable exceptions, such as reference to the story of Cain and Abel and the injunction to serve as

¹² Addams, *Hull House*, 51.

¹³ Addams, *Hull House*, 52.

¹⁴ Brandon Harnish discusses this connection to the Social Gospel and Progressive movements and contrasts it to the Catholicism of the time in his article “Jane Addams’s Social Gospel Synthesis and the Catholic Response,” *The Independent Review* 16, no. 1 (Summer 2011), 93-100.

¹⁵ Knight, *Spirit in Action*, 23-24.

“brother’s keeper” in Genesis, Addams turned to the example of Jesus in his human life and in his words.¹⁶ For Addams, the Bible formed the inspiration for her life of service and was a foundational source for determining how best to live the vocation for which she was destined – a vocation that, whether serving the poor at the Hull House or speaking at international women’s conferences, required a deep, humble, and persistent concern for the poor and disadvantaged.

From a sociological perspective, she came to understand the draw to religion through the Thomas Carlyle’s work on hero worship. In an 1879 essay in the Rockford Seminary magazine, a young Addams noted that religion had become “very easy and requires no self-sacrifice.” Addams noted that the religion that enjoys the most success and popularity “appeals to the heroic in man, and lifts him above the common place.”¹⁷ Thomas Carlyle’s description of Jesus Christ influenced Jane Addams’s understanding. In *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, Carlyle deemphasized the miracles Jesus performed and instead described Jesus as a hero within the Greek tradition of heroes. As a faith focused on the person of Jesus, Christianity thus represented the most evolved manifestation of human civilization.¹⁸ A more robust understanding of Jesus as the ultimate hero would do nothing short of inspire a nation to do the true work of the Gospel.

Addams found no greater scriptural justification for this than Matthew 16:24-26. In 1927, Addams points to Tolstoy as her most significant theological influence as an adult and credits him with opening her eyes to the true meaning of these verses and others. In an essay in *The Christian Century*, Addams points to Tolstoy’s *My Religion* and *What Then Must We Do?* as instrumental in shaping her own approach to theology and activism. What struck Addams as so powerful about Tolstoy’s intellectual work was not his virulent outrage about poverty and political and social oppression, but his proposed response to it. Rejecting both benevolence and coercive force, Tolstoy advocated beginning with one’s own personal righteousness. Tolstoy showed that strict application of the biblical law, combined with direct response to injustice, meant that “complacency [was] impossible.”¹⁹ Personal integrity and societal integrity exist in a dialectical relationship. Not attending to one would be catastrophic to the other. The inner work of the individual feeds, deepens and infuses the outer work of activism and compassion. Without the inner work, the outer is ineffective and shallow. At the same time, “a righteous life cannot be lived in a society that is not righteous,” and so no one can flourish in inaction.²⁰

Though Addams hesitated to focus on a particular passage as her proof text, her reading of Matthew 16 exemplifies not only her particular approach to scripture but also the message she pulls from it. In this passage, the Pharisees and Sadducees are testing Jesus by asking for a sign

¹⁶ Addams engages this story in an 1880 notebook entry, cited in *Selected Papers, Vol. 2*, 39. Hull House records also suggest that Addams occasionally presented talks on the topic “Am I My Brother’s Keeper?” as a means of reflecting on Christian responsibility to one’s neighbor. This theme emerges again in her 1892 address, “The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements” in Plymouth, Massachusetts, where Addams emphasizes the centrality of brotherhood as a basis for social commitment and compassion.

¹⁷ Jane Addams, “Follow Thou Thy Star,” *Rockford Seminary Magazine* (July 1879), *Selected Papers, Vol. 1*, 285.

¹⁸ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, ed. David R. Sorensen and Brent E. Kinser (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013 [1840]).

¹⁹ Jane Addams, “A Book that Changed my Life,” *The Christian Century* 44 (Oct. 13, 1927), 1196

²⁰ Addams, “A Book that Changed my Life,” 1196.

from heaven, and Jesus responds by deriding them for even asking. He then questions the faith of his disciples and discusses with them the public perception of his identity. When Simon Peter responds appropriately, Jesus says he is the rock on which his church will be built, and he orders his disciples to secrecy. Jesus presages his coming suffering, and he chastises Peter for trying to prevent it. Jesus' directive here suggests that discipleship requires a difficult path, a struggle and the certainty of loss. It requires swimming upstream with constant attentiveness.

For Addams, as for Tolstoy, following this directive made "complacency impossible."²¹ Addams was nothing if not a hard worker. While some have pointed to her emphasis on action as a sign of her pragmatist spirit and practical nature, others have argued that this emphasis on work has a philosophical weight of its own. Joel Winkelman has argued that Addams's emphasizes work not because it occupies one's sinful nature, but rather because work "could liberate the political potential of human beings, becoming the means for individuals to discover a public identity and purpose."²²

This absolute fluidity in considering communal and individual ethics finds its most eloquent articulation in Addams's 1907 book *Democracy and Social Ethics*, where she addresses the question of complacency as a state of ignorance. To change oneself internally is to think differently; to be more righteous in one's intellect and heart without social adjustment leads to failure. One cannot pursue individual righteousness or morality without attention to the social and without changing the nature and location of one's work to fully understand and work beside the lowliest in society. Indeed, one can never claim exemption from shared responsibility for all the world's social problems: "We are all involved in this political corruption, and as members of the community stand indicted. This is the penalty of a democracy, — that we are bound to move forward or retrograde together. None of us can stand aside; our feet are mired in the same soil, and our lungs breathe the same air."²³

Non-resistant Action

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well. (Matthew 5:38-39)

As her civic work and writing continued, Addams moved from her localized social reform work, centralized at the Hull House and focused on the urban working poor, toward an international focus on ending war and the violence and injustices that war brings. In her 1907 book *Newer Ideals of Peace*, Addams eloquently advocates peace brought about through international activism, as well as a decrease in militarism in order to improve labor conditions and to involve women in all aspects of government. She hoped to join and encourage "a rising tide of moral enthusiasm slowly engulfing all pride of conquest and making war impossible."²⁴ For

²¹ Addams, "A Book that Changed my Life," 1196.

²² Joel Winkelman, "A Working Democracy: Jane Addams on the Meaning of Work," *The Review of Politics* 75 (2013), 381.

²³ Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1907), 256.

²⁴ Jane Addams, *Newer Ideals of Peace* (NY: MacMillan Co., 1907), 238.

Addams, in the words of Jesus lie the seeds for the democracy later articulated by the founding fathers.²⁵

In this thinking, the influence of Tolstoy remains at the forefront. Addams wrote of Tolstoy's *My Religion* as a life-changing text, as it introduced her to the idea of nonresistance evident in Matthew 5:38-39. As Tolstoy writes, the very "substance of Christianity" was "love, humility, self-denial, and the duty of returning good for evil."²⁶ Tolstoy viewed Jesus' teaching as fundamentally changing and updating the Mosaic law, and he understood Jesus' dictates as cut and dried directives for living a life of faith. Tolstoy wrote, "Let all the world practice the doctrine of Jesus and the reign of God will come upon earth; if I alone practice it, I shall do what I can to better my own condition and the condition of those about me."²⁷ Living this life could not be done in affluence or even in comfort. Instead, "poverty is one of the conditions of following the doctrine of Jesus, a condition indispensable to those who would enter the kingdom of God and be happy."²⁸

Addams was unable to reach these conclusions while existing in an environment of complete privilege. It was during her time traveling abroad and living in Baltimore that she read, digested, and applied Tolstoy's ideas in particular. In Baltimore, Addams enjoyed time in high society but also increasingly realized the social stratification and the abject poverty that existed in America's cities, and she began to reckon with her own complicity in these problems. Tolstoy spoke to both these realities and her existential concerns. In her *Christian Century* piece, Addams writes, "There was something almost Talmudic in his passionate desire to fulfill the law literally."²⁹

Through Tolstoy, Addams comes to understand connections between individual and societal righteousness as well as the power and necessity of enabling humanitarianism to overcome the challenges and waste of resources implicit in industrialization and growing militarization. In *What Then Must We Do?* Tolstoy describes his own encounter with poverty and the evolution in his thinking of how to cope with it. This evolution led to a spiritual awakening that revealed to him the true potential of Christianity and the wide gulf between the faith and its current incarnation. He writes, "...[T]he reason it was impossible for us, the rich, to help the town poor, lay also in the impossibility of coming into close touch with them, and that this impossibility we ourselves create by our whole life and by the whole use we make of our wealth."³⁰

This drive to action was particularly important for young Americans, about whom Addams quipped that "uselessness hangs about them heavily."³¹ This new generation of young women and men, who were well educated and idealistic but were lost, had great potential if given the proper outlet for their enthusiasms. This outlet could naturally come from the Christian faith, rightly

²⁵ Jean Bethke Elshtain traces this connection between the Gospels and American democracy in Addams's thought in *Jane Adams and the Dream of American Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

²⁶ Tolstoy, Leo. *My Religion*, 3rd ed., trans. Huntington Smith (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1885), 2.

²⁷ Tolstoy, *My Religion*, 160.

²⁸ Tolstoy, *My Religion*, 200.

²⁹ Addams, "A Book that Changed My Life," 1196.

³⁰ Leo Tolstoy, *What Then Must We Do?*, trans. by Aylmer Maude (Bideford, Devon; Green Books, 1991 [1886]), 55.

³¹ Addams, *Hull House*, 120.

understood. In this spirit, Addams foresaw a “renaissance going forward in Christianity” in which Jesus’ true message of faith in action would come to fruition.³² This view of the pragmatic Jesus resonated with many Social Gospel ideas, but it also belies a particular view of the universalism of Jesus’ message. As Addams wrote, “Jesus had no set of truths labeled Religious. On the contrary, his doctrine was that all truth is one, that the appropriation of it is freedom. His teaching had no dogma to mark it off from truth and action in general.”³³ Religion should be neither relegated to church on Sunday nor understood as concerned with only the City of God. Instead, “action is the only medium man has for receiving and appropriating truth.”³⁴ Addams attempted to enliven latent or dormant energies and impulses in people and in particular communities. The result would be nothing short of “social and individual salvation.”³⁵

The Impossibility of Complacency

Jane Addams’s life was, as Jean Bethke Elshtain wrote, a “Pilgrim’s Progress.” Elshtain describes Addams as affirming “the proposition that the action of free citizens helps us to recognize and to sustain a good in common that we cannot know alone.”³⁶ In examining the influence of scripture in the work and philosophy of the activists, philosophers, and revolutionaries of history, the impulse may be to focus in on particular chapters and verses. Certainly, for many philosophers and theologians, entire theologies have been built on particular sections of scripture. However, for Jane Addams, the scriptural influence is both subtle and deeply infused not only throughout her philosophy but also her personality. Growing up with a deeply religious but unconventional father gave her the particular combination of a deep religious commitment and an inability to conform to a preset doctrine. The early loss she experienced as a child led her to fear that her life could end before she found her own path.

As a result of these life circumstances, she faced the challenge of developing her own theological perspective and determining how to live that theology, intrinsically motivated by the anxiety flowing from her early-lived experience. Addams was always financially stable and always deeply aware of the poverty of others – this was an imbalance that she felt physically and that demanded action. Raised as a seeker outside the protective guidelines of a denomination, she experienced real pressure to live morally without a ready resource through which to find answers. This imbued her with a compulsion to always seek the truth, always unsettle, and never be satisfied. Even as she developed some clarity as to what that theology might be, she struggled with persistent self-doubt and anxiety that was caused both by her status as a woman in the early 20th Century and the reality that any attempt to model one’s life after Jesus’ example inevitably will be incomplete. A reluctant theologian and an unlikely biblical interpreter, Addams used scripture in seemingly contradictory ways; she read it narrowly and literally but also holistically. Its message infused her every action, and she settled into complacency neither in her reading of it nor in her own search for righteousness. The paradox and power with which Addams encounters scripture suggests that the Bible’s most earnest and faithful interpreters are not always the most obvious in the cannon of

³² Addams, *Hull House*, 122.

³³ Addams, *Hull House*, 122.

³⁴ Addams, *Hull House*, 122.

³⁵ Addams, *Hull House*, 127.

³⁶ Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Jane Addams: A Pilgrim’s Progress,” *The Journal of Religion* 78, no. 3 (July 1998), 360.

America's greatest voices. The real work of biblical interpretation can often happen, not necessarily on the pages of a philosophical tome, but in the internal musings and wrestling of a humble and faithful mind.

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