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W. T. Stead and the Civic Church, 1886-95:

The Vision behind *If Christ Came to Chicago!*

by STEWART J. BROWN

If Christ Came to Chicago! A Plea for the Union of All Who Love in the Service of All Who Suffer, by the prominent British journalist, social activist and religious thinker, W. T. Stead, appeared in American and British editions in the spring of 1894. It was a substantial volume of some 460 pages, which provided a sustained critique of municipal corruption and social conditions in Chicago, combined with practical proposals for civic reform. A refrain running throughout the book was the question of how Christ would respond to the problems of Chicago were He to return in bodily form. It was a motif that Stead had borrowed from the 'Parable' of his favourite poet, the American Romantic and abolitionist, James Russell Lowell, and it enabled Stead to contrast a transcendent moral ideal of the 'City of God' represented by Christ with the earthy, sordid, all too human realities of slum life, homelessness, prostitution, saloons, ward politics, tax evasion, bribery, police corruption and crime. As with Stead's previous investigative journalism in the 'Maiden Tribute' articles – in which he had famously exposed widespread child prostitution in London in the mid 1880s – some found his 'revelations' of municipal corruption in Chicago to be exaggerated and sensationalist, and his lengthy depictions of brothel life to border on voyeurism.¹ For others, however, his exposures of Chicago's social problems were both convincing and disturbing.

A work of investigative journalism on social conditions in Chicago was bound to find readers. Chicago was one of the fastest growing cities in the world, with a

population that had increased from 100,000 in 1860 to 1,100,000 in 1890; it was a major railroad hub, industrial centre and the meatpacking capital of the world. It was the scene of violent confrontations of capital and labour, most notoriously the Haymarket Riot of 1886. It hosted the World's Columbian Exposition, or Chicago World's Fair, in 1893, with exhibitions from forty-six nations that attracted some twenty-six million visitors.² Stead's book was a commercial success; indeed, within two months of publication, it had sold over 100,000 copies in Chicago alone, and was being translated into German and Swedish. It eventually sold some 300,000 copies on both sides of the Atlantic, while Stead would consider it his best work.³

A major aim behind the writing of *If Christ Came to Chicago!* was to promote the establishment in Chicago and other cities of the 'Civic Church'. This was a notion that Stead had been developing for several years before writing his Chicago book. The Civic Church, in his conception, was an institution that would unite people of good will, of all faiths and none, for the work of social redemption in the modern city. It represented 'the Church of the future' and it would, in his words, bring 'the reunion of Christendom upon a basis wide enough to include Jews, Agnostics and all who may love their fellow-men, whatever their creed may be'.⁴ It reflected Stead's belief that the essence of religion was service and sacrifice for others, and that religious men and women should work for the kingdom of God on earth. The book was a contribution to the North Atlantic 'kingdom movement' that flourished in the 1890s – a movement that called for Christian social efforts to realise the kingdom of God on earth and that included the work of Robert Flint in Scotland, of Charles Gore, Henry Scott Holland and the Christian Social Union in England, of the kingdom movement of George D. Herron and George A. Gates at Iowa College, Grinnell, and of Walter Rauschenbusch and the Brotherhood of the Kingdom in New York.⁵ *If*

Christ Came to Chicago! was essentially an extended sermon. Stead depicted the sin and depravity of the city with emotive language aimed at summoning people to seek social redemption through the Civic Church. The book closed with a portrayal of the blessed state of the converted and redeemed city, which had now become a true 'City of God'.

Stead's visit to Chicago in 1893-94 has been explored in a chapter in Frederick Whyte's biography of Stead published in 1925, and in valuable articles by Joseph Baylen, Dennis Downey and Gary Scott Smith.⁶ These studies focused on Stead's activities in Chicago, including his efforts to promote civic reform in the Midwestern city and his leading role in the formation of the Civic Federation of Chicago. This article, in contrast, will explore Stead's campaign in Britain for the Civic Church and consider how his campaign informed the approaches and themes of *If Christ Came to Chicago!* The emphasis will be on the British context and the vision that informed Stead's book. The article will show how Stead's major literary work formed a manifesto for the Civic Church and a call for the revival of national religion in Britain's complex urban-industrial society.

The Church of the Future

W. T. Stead was born in 1849, the son of a Congregational minister in Howden-on-Tyne, and he was raised within a strict Calvinist home, where, he would later recall, he was taught to view the world as the 'vestibule of Eternity'.⁷ It was a gifted family. His younger brother, Francis Herbert Stead, would become a Congregationalist minister, Christian social activist and founder of an East London Settlement, 'Browning House'. His sister, Mary Isabella Stead, was also a Christian social activist, who founded the Young Women's Christian Association at Leicester.⁸ Stead

claimed to have had a conversion experience in 1862, amid the Revival of 1859-62, and he remained a practicing Congregationalist throughout his life. He began attracting attention for local journalistic writing while in his teens, and in 1871, at the age of only 22, he was appointed editor of the Darlington-based *Northern Echo*.

Under Stead's editorship, the *Northern Echo* became an uncompromising voice of the Nonconformist Conscience. He threw the newspaper behind the campaign for the abolition of the Contagious Diseases Acts, a series of parliamentary acts passed between 1864 and 1869 and aimed at limiting venereal disease through the mandatory testing and licensing of prostitutes. For Stead, these acts amounted to the state sanctioning of prostitution and represented a form of sex slavery. He described the campaigners against the acts, including the evangelical Anglican, Josephine Butler, as 'New Abolitionists', who had taken up the mantle of the previous generation and its struggle for the abolition of African slavery. In 1876, Stead embraced the campaign for British intervention to end the 'Bulgarian atrocities', massacres associated with the Ottoman suppression of a popular rising in the Balkans.

In 1880, he was appointed assistant editor of a London evening newspaper, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and he moved south with his young family. Becoming sole editor of the *Pall Mall* in 1883, Stead pioneered what was soon being called the 'New Journalism'. This comprised aggressive investigative reporting, sensationalist stories, interviews with prominent figures, bold headlines, racy prose, copious illustrations, and numerous 'extra' issues exploring contentious themes.⁹ Under his editorship, the *Pall Mall* conducted a series of social crusades against the evils of slum housing, child poverty, low wages, and poor sanitation, while it promoted what Stead portrayed as an ethical foreign policy, which included convincing the government to send the evangelical, anti-slavery activist, General Charles Gordon, on his ill-fated mission to

the Sudan. Perhaps the best known of his *Pall Mall* journalistic campaigns was his effort in 1885 to expose child prostitution in London. In a series of sensationalist articles entitled 'the Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon', Stead contended that child prostitution was widespread and that impoverished children were regularly sold to wealthy West End customers for sexual purposes. To provide evidence for this, he purchased a thirteen-year old girl, Eliza Armstrong, from her mother and then, with the assistance of the Salvation Army, and transported her to Paris. When the details became known, Stead was convicted in the civil courts of the crime of moving a minor out of the country without her father's consent, and he was imprisoned for a couple of months. But he had attracted national attention and roused public opinion on the issue of the sexual abuse of children, and for many, especially Stead himself, his imprisonment had been a form of martyrdom.

Stead began developing his conception of a new Church of the Future in early 1886. While in Holloway Prison over the Eliza Armstrong affair, he claimed to have a spiritual experience calling him to a new religion of service, or what he described as an inner voice calling him to 'be no longer a Christian, be a Christ'. 'That voice', he added, 'was distinct and clear as possible'.¹⁰ In response to this divine call, he publicised his notion of a New Church in an 'extra' issue of the *Pall Mall Gazette* in June 1886. This included short essays on the future of religion by eighteen prominent figures, ranging from the biblical scholar, F. W. Farrar of Westminster Abbey, to the Positivist author, Frederick Harrison. In his editor's preface, Stead described his own ideal of a universal Church as one that would 'include all who can minister to the service of humanity' and that would seek to address the multifarious needs of men and women by promoting a broad and inclusive culture. It would treat men and women equally, recognising the Motherhood as well as Fatherhood of God. 'The

ideal Church', he insisted, 'will include Atheists and run a theatre and a public house'.

'In essence', he maintained,

all good men are of one religion. You need only to go deep enough to come upon the same bed-rock of conviction underlying all forms of religious faith. All earnest men have at bottom but one creed, but one ideal, but one duty in life. It is summed up in one petition in the Lord's Prayer, 'Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'... To spend our little life so that we may leave the great world better than we found it, that is the chief end of all good men.¹¹

'The man who acts as Christ would do under the same circumstances', Stead wrote in 1889, 'is the true believer, though all his dogmas be heretical and his mind is in a state of blank agnosticism. The true religion is that which makes men most like Christ.' And Christ's ideal, he added, was simple: 'to take trouble to do good to others'.¹²

He developed his vision of the 'Church of the Future' further in an interview which appeared in the journal *Great Thoughts* in January 1891, and then in a book with accompanying commentary by a number of British religious leaders. He repeated his insistence that the Church should include atheists, agnostics and non-Christians, should run theatres and pubs, and should unite people for social improvement. The sole requirement for membership would be a willingness to work and sacrifice for the betterment of humanity, or in Stead's phrase, to 'be a Christ'. He wanted a Church that would be broad enough to include such figures as his friend, Annie Besant, the feminist, socialist, labour organiser, spiritualist and theosophist, who had left her husband, an Anglican cleric, and later became shunned by

‘respectable’ society for her advocacy of birth control. Although she no longer accepted Christian doctrine and was condemned by most Christians, she followed, in Stead’s view, the example of the historical Jesus and suffered in the service of others. ‘Many are now Christs’, he insisted in his interview in *Great Thoughts*, ‘whom we condemn because they are not of our way of thought. Mrs. Besant is one of the best Christians I know’.¹³

Indeed, for a time in late 1887 and early 1888, Stead and Besant viewed this Church of the Future as their special joint project. Besant was captivated by his conception of the ‘Church of the future’, she told Stead on 1 January 1888, ‘partly because I so passionately believe in it, partly because you have so directly laid your hand on the centre of the Atheism of myself & hundreds like me. It is despair of your God that has made me Atheist’. And it was, she further explained, the undeserved suffering of so many of the poorest and most vulnerable in society that had caused her to despair of God.¹⁴ But now Stead’s call for a new Church of service brought her renewed hope. It became for her their ‘special movement’, to be achieved through ‘our political & spiritual marriage’.¹⁵ She struggled to embrace his theistic views, though she was unable to do so. Stead soon distanced his new Church movement from his friendship with Besant, but the notion of including someone with her passion for humanity – despite her lack of Christian faith – continued to inform his Church ideal.¹⁶ ‘Whatever ups and downs there have been [in their relationship]’, he wrote in 1891, ‘have only deepened the conviction which I formed when I met her, that there are few living women who have in them more of the elements of the Christian saint than this fiery assailant of the Christian creed’.¹⁷

Other influences on Stead’s conception of the Church of the Future included William and Catherine Booth of the Salvation Army. Stead had been deeply

impressed with the Salvation Army since his first exposure to the movement in 1879 while a young editor in Darlington, and he had enlisted the support of the Salvation Army in his 'Maiden Tribute' campaign. In 1890, he assisted William Booth in writing *In Darkest England and the Way Out*, which marked the Salvation Army's adoption of social reform as a major aspect of its mission work. 'What is the Salvation Army?' Stead asked in 1890: 'It is the miracle of our time. It is the latest revelation of the potency of the invisible over the visible, the concrete manifestation of the power of the spirit over matter'.¹⁸ He was especially impressed with the Army's new social commitments which his contributions to *In Darkest England* had helped to define. 'The Army', he wrote, 'now feels strong enough to attempt something more than the saving of the individual. It is entering upon a campaign for the salvation of society'.¹⁹ Another major influence on Stead's Church of the Future was Cardinal Manning, Primate of the Roman Catholic Church in England.²⁰ Stead had developed a close friendship with Manning during the 'Maiden Tribute' affair, when he later insisted that 'Cardinal Manning was my most effective ally'.²¹ He especially valued Manning's social initiatives on behalf of the London poor and his role in helping to arbitrate a settlement of the London dockers strike of 1889.

'Cardinal Manning', recalled Stead's friend, the Methodist ecumenical leader, Henry Lunn, 'when he was nearly eighty years of age, used to climb up to Stead's office on the second floor of Mowbray house from time to time. He was much attached to Stead.'²² For his part, Stead looked on Manning as a father. 'Since my father died', Stead wrote in 1890, 'there has been no man who has been so good to me, so helpful, so loving, and so true as Cardinal Manning'.²³ Through Manning's influence, Stead came to view the Pope as a potential leader of the Church of the Future. 'Humanity', Stead enthused in 1889, 'wandering forlorn in the Wilderness of Sin, cries aloud for a

new Moses to lead it across the desert to the Promised Land of the new social order'. 'The Vicar of Christ', he added, must accept 'the responsibility of answering to that call'.²⁴ Stead's future Church was becoming increasingly eclectic. 'With his marvellous powers of assimilating something from everybody's creed', Lunn later observed, he drew upon the Booths, Manning and Besant.²⁵

Stead continued to be moved by a sense of divine calling. 'I now see', he noted in a private memorandum in late 1889, 'that I am called to found for the Nineteenth Century a city of God which will be to the age of the printing press and the steam engine what the Catholic Church was to the Europe of the 10th century'.²⁶ In 1890, he resigned the editorship of the *Pall Mall Gazette* and founded a new periodical, the *Review of Reviews*, to give expression to his faith in a coming new world order. The purpose of the *Review of Reviews* was to provide a digest of the best journalistic writing around the world, as a way of promoting common interests and reform commitments.²⁷ 'What is wanted', he wrote in January 1890, in the preface to the first issue, 'is a revival of civic faith, a quickening of life in the political sphere, the inspiring of men and women with the conception of what may be done towards the salvation of the world, if they will but bring to bear upon public affairs the same spirit of self-sacrificing labour that so many thousands manifest in the ordinary drudgery of parochial and evangelistic work'.²⁸ The *Review of Reviews*, he confided in a private memorandum, brought with it 'boundless possibilities, the unexpected first step in a world-wide journalistic, civic church, with a faith and religious orders and endowments and all the rest of paraphernalia of the Church Militant'.²⁹

In 1891, Stead began a national campaign through the *Review of Reviews* to establish his Church of the future, which he now described as a 'Civic Church', in towns and cities throughout Britain.³⁰ It was to represent a revival of national religion

and reunite communities around a common set of moral values. The Civic Church, he explained at Cardiff in February 1892, 'is really the recognition of the essence of a National Church; it is a recognition of the relation of the conscience of the community to its secular affairs'.³¹ It was to be, he further explained in the *Review of Reviews* of August 1892, 'a real Church, a working Church, a Church co-extensive with the community in which it exists ... a Church which embraces the whole range of human life and which influences all the affairs of life, alike in personal conduct and in affairs of municipal and national government'. By reviving the old unifying ideal of national religion in Britain's diverse society, it would play a role similar to that of the Catholic Church in medieval England, and assume responsibility for education, literature, the arts, marriage, social justice, festivals and holidays.³² In March 1893, the *Review of Reviews* reported on local efforts to establish Civic Churches in Brighton, Bradford, Birmingham, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester, Maidenhead, Rochdale, and Swansea, as well as in Adelaide and Melbourne in Australia. In some cities, such as Brighton, the movement took the form of a civic centre, uniting churches, trades unions, temperance societies and school boards and poor law guardians. In other cities, including Birmingham, the movement took the form of a federal council of churches.³³ Stead himself took a particular interest in the Edinburgh movement, speaking at a conference in the Free Church Assembly Hall, and calling on the city's 148 churches and voluntary associations to unite in a model Civic Church, and embrace what he described as a 'new social edition of the "Westminster Confession of Faith"', applied to present day circumstances dealing with the actual needs of human beings living in modern society'.³⁴

Stead developed his ideas further in a paper on 'The Civic Church' which he prepared for the first World's Parliament of Religions. This met in September 1893

in Chicago in association with the World's Fair; its aim was to promote co-operation and unity among the world religions.³⁵ Stead did not attend the Parliament, but his paper was read for him and later published in the proceedings.³⁶ In his paper, he maintained that the Civic Church 'is concerned not simply with the salvation of the individual man, but with the regeneration of the whole community. The work of the Civic Church is to establish the kingdom of heaven here among men – in other words to reconstitute human society, to regenerate the state, and inspire it with an aspiration after a divine ideal'.³⁷ There should be one Civic Church in each town and city, to unite and energise the efforts of the various religious and social bodies. 'One town, one church', he observed, 'is as old as the days of the apostles.'³⁸ The Civic Church would serve to inspire, educate and inform the developing work of municipal democracy. 'The duty of the church', he insisted, 'is ever to be the pioneer of social progress, to be the educator of moral sentiment'.³⁹ The Civic Church, he insisted, would not be exclusively Christian. Rather, he hoped it would be a world-wide movement, with Christians, Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists uniting in shared service to humanity. Indeed, he suggested that 'if this Parliament of Religions is to found the church of the future', it should proceed on the basis of the Civic Church.⁴⁰ Stead's paper was, according to Dennis Downey, 'perhaps the clearest evocation of the churches' role in a program of social renewal' presented at the Parliament and it found a warm reception.⁴¹

In September 1893, Stead attended the Church Reunion Conference at Lucerne, Switzerland, where he presented his Civic Church as a programme for Christian reunion. The Lucerne Conference was part of the Grindelwald series of Church Union Conferences, held between 1892 and 1895, which represented a significant contribution to the modern ecumenical movement.⁴² In an article published

in the *Review of Reviews* prior to the conference, Stead argued that his Civic Church ideal offered a new beginning for the ecumenical movement.⁴³ For too long, he maintained, ecumenical efforts had been based on negotiations between denominations in an effort to secure a 'uniform creed, uniform ritual or uniform church government'. All these efforts, however, had failed. A more promising way forward was to begin with co-operation among the churches in locally-based, practical social work. 'Instead of seeking to get the churches to unite and form one church', he insisted, 'the true plan is to form a civic or municipal or national union, comprising all existing churches and all who will co-operate with them in any geographical or social unit'.⁴⁴ Stead had been full of hope that the Lucerne Conference would embrace his Civic Church as a practical means of uniting the Churches through shared social service at the municipal level. In the event, he was disappointed. While a full day was devoted to his Civic Church, the conference rejected his proposals. His long-time friend, the London-based social activist and Methodist preacher, Hugh Price Hughes, led the assault, proclaiming that 'he could not accept Mr. Stead's Civic Church, as it was not based on any recognition of Christianity'.⁴⁵ In the summer of 1893, Stead was also absorbed with plans to establish a new London daily newspaper, *The Daily Paper*, which he associated with his religious mission and which was to have for its motto: 'For the Union of All who Love in the Service of All who Suffer'. A sample number of the newspaper was issued on 4 October 1893, and it included a call for a socially active, 'revived and militant' Church.⁴⁶ Late in October, with the future of *The Daily Paper* uncertain (it would fail to secure sufficient backing), Stead made his first visit to the United States. He travelled to Chicago, to see the World's Fair before it closed and to promote his Civic Church programme in the New World.

If Christ Came to Chicago

Stead's public activities in Chicago have been well described by Joseph Baylen, Dennis Downey, and Gary Scott Smith, and there is no need to go over the ground again. Suffice it to say that Stead was in Chicago from 31 October 1893 to 2 March 1894 (with a couple weeks in Toronto and shorter visits to Grinnell, Iowa, and Detroit).⁴⁷ On his arrival in Chicago, he found he was already well known in the city both for his 'Maiden Tribute' campaign of 1885, and for the successful *American Review of Reviews* (which he had established in 1891).⁴⁸ Less than two weeks after his arrival in Chicago, on the afternoon and evening of 12 November, he held large meetings in the Central Music Hall to introduce his Civic Church ideal; these meetings would lead to the formation of the Civic Federation of Chicago, a body that was modelled on his Civic Church.⁴⁹ He was certainly puffed up by the reception he received. 'It is curious to see how I became the centre and leader of the whole [progressive] movement in Chicago', he wrote to his friend, the courtier and historian, Reginald Brett, on 22 November 1893. 'Chicago', he continued, 'is said to be the most energetic city in America. I don't think there is any one in it today who does not admit that I went one better all round, & woke them up in a way that startled them not a little'.⁵⁰ Along with his activities in Chicago, Stead also made connections with the Kingdom movement of the radical social gospeller, George D. Herron, lecturing at Iowa College, Grinnell.⁵¹ Stead seriously contemplated turning the editorship of *The Review of Reviews* over to his brother, establishing a Chicago weekly newspaper, and remaining permanently in Chicago.⁵² Instead, he completed a book on Chicago, which he intended as a major statement of his social ideal, and he then returned to England. He corrected the final proofs of his Chicago book the night before he left

the city on 2 March, and was back in London by mid March 1894. *If Christ Came to Chicago!* was published in both the United States and Britain in April.

The book was largely a manifesto for his Civic Church idea. It dealt at length with the depravity of civic life in Chicago, including the suffering of the poor and homeless, dominance of business interests, widespread bribery of public officials, corruption in public finances, election fraud, tax evasion by the rich, exploitation of women through low wages and prostitution, indifference to public safety on the part of the railways, gross inequalities in income, alcohol and opium abuse, and gun violence. Stead provided vivid first-hand accounts of conditions in the slums, brothels, and jails (where the homeless were allowed to huddle in the passages between the cells for warmth on bitterly cold nights). Chicago was suffering the effects of the severe economic crisis that gripped the United States in 1893, with large numbers out of work, homeless and struggling to survive the grim winter of 1893-94. But for Stead, the conditions he witnessed were not simply the result of a temporary crisis. Rather, they showed Chicago to be a fallen city, in need of redemption. He contrasted the brutal conditions of the poor with the huge wealth commanded by such millionaires as Marshall Field in retail sales, Philip D. Armour in meatpacking, and George M. Pullman in the manufacture of railway carriages; these men, he observed, were the 'deities of modern Chicago' and the 'idols of the market-place'.⁵³ But these commercial 'deities', and indeed the rest of the middle and upper classes, were doing precious little to address the social misery around them. Stead insisted that he did not mean his book as 'an attack upon Chicago'; its appalling conditions mirrored those in cities throughout the Western world. What these conditions revealed was the loss of faith in the essential Christian message of selfless service to others. 'How we believe in Christ', Stead insisted in the preface to the British edition, 'is shown not by what

we say about Him, not by the temples which we build in His honour, nor by the hymns which we sing in His praise, but by the extent to which we succeed in restoring in man the lost image of God'.⁵⁴

If Christ were to come to Chicago, Stead maintained, He would not look to the city's churches for the work of social redemption. Chicago's churches, Stead observed, were well meaning, but they were weak and ineffective in responding to social suffering and injustice. They had become 'whited sepulchres', places for weekly Sunday gatherings to hear sermons and soothing music. They provided no united front against the social and political evils of the modern city. Divided by sectarian animosities and 'tethered' by their reliance on wealthy trustees or major donors, they had lost the respect of the working classes. Were Christ to come to Chicago, Stead maintained, He would go not to the churches, but rather to the city hall, for it would be here that He would find real prospects for combating the endemic social evils and achieving social righteousness. 'If Christ came to Chicago, the city and county administration would seem to Him to be more like the Church which He founded nineteenth hundred years ago than any other organisation lay or ecclesiastical which exists in Chicago at this moment.'⁵⁵ Christ in Chicago would draw together all those working for social improvement, in the police force, fire service, newspapers, ward politics, labour unions, and churches, and form them into a progressive Civic Church. It was the Civic Church that was destined to be the new Church Universal for 'saving the world by self-sacrificing love'.⁵⁶ This Civic Church would elevate the new democracy with spiritual values and unite men and women of all religious persuasions. 'A new Catholicity', he maintained, 'has dawned upon the world. All religions are now recognized as essentially Divine. All have something to teach us –

how to make the common man more like God. The true religion is that which makes men most like Christ.’⁵⁷

In the penultimate chapter, Stead turned his attention to the institution in Chicago that most exemplified his ideal of the Civic Church. This was Hull House, on the West Side of the city, a secular settlement that had been established five years earlier by Jane Addams and eighteen residents. Hull House was, he maintained, superior to the settlements in England, including Toynbee Hall and University Hall, Bethnal Green, or the recent settlements in New York and Boston. It was far more inclusive, zealous and humane in its ‘multifarious activities’ than any of these other settlements—in part because it was headed by a gifted woman who insisted upon its independence from the churches. ‘Hull House has been enthusiastic without being intolerant, and broad without losing the fervour of its humanitarian zeal.’⁵⁸ It hosted a range of activities, including women’s clubs, men’s clubs, ethnic clubs, boys’ clubs, girls’ clubs, cooking clubs, nature excursions, playgrounds, crèches, gymnasium, games room, reading room, dispensary, doctor’s surgery, nurse home visits, library, literary clubs, dramatic groups, musical groups, university extension courses, and choral societies. This approached Stead’s ideal of the Civic Church: what Chicago needed was ‘a multiplication of Hull Houses all over the city’.⁵⁹ In the final chapter, he portrayed Chicago as it might be if redeemed by the Civic Church – an attractive, dynamic and caring modern city of God, elevated and transformed through the union of religion and progressive politics. He closed with a plea for his new civic religion, which alone would bring the ‘New Redemption’ through a spiritualised democracy.⁶⁰

If Christ Came to the British City

On its publication, Stead sent copies of *If Christ Came to Chicago* to a number of political leaders in Britain, including Lord Rosebery, who had recently succeeded Gladstone as the Liberal prime minister, and Lord Salisbury, the Conservative leader. While Salisbury did little more than acknowledge receipt, Rosebery told Stead that he had read the book with special interest.⁶¹ In sending a copy to his friend, John Burns, the socialist labour leader, Stead wrote that ‘I want you particularly to read it, because I think there are many things in it which will enable you to feel more at one with me than I think you have done in the past’.⁶² In Britain, Stead continued his speaking campaign for the development of Civic Churches.⁶³ In an address in April 1894 in the Grassmarket of Edinburgh, then a notorious slum, he announced what he called the ‘new incarnation’ of ‘God made manifest once more in the Christ of the Slums, of the Shelter and of the Gaol’.⁶⁴

In the autumn of 1894, Stead attempted to repeat his achievement of initiating the Civic Federation of Chicago – now by establishing a new national political organisation in Britain to represent the Civic Church. This he named the ‘National Social Union’. He described the proposed organisation in a long article in the *Review of Reviews* in September 1894.⁶⁵ It was to be a federation of Churches and voluntary associations, under the general direction of what he termed an ‘ecumenical council’ consisting of leading representatives from the ‘political, social, religious, moral, philanthropic, educational, administrative and recreational’ areas of national life. The Union would, he enthused, ‘establish among all who love their fellow-men such a sense of the unity of their aspirations, and of the need for concerted effort, as in the earlier years the Catholic Church supplied to an undivided Christendom’.⁶⁶ As well as restoring the sense of national religion, the National Social Union would take an active role in promoting and directing the new initiative in local democracy

represented by the Local Government Act of 1894 (which established elected councils in rural and urban districts). It would also organise local social work, and strive to reconcile labour and capital through arbitration boards.

Adopting the model of the successful launch event of the Civic Federation of Chicago the previous year, Stead inaugurated his National Social Union with afternoon and evening public meetings in the Queen's Hall, London, on 28 October 1894.⁶⁷ The Queen's Hall meeting was very much a Stead-centred event. To chair the afternoon meeting, Stead recruited James Branch, a member of the London County Council, who had been the chairman of the jury that had found Stead guilty in the Eliza Armstrong case in 1885. Stead also convinced a number of leading social activists, including John Burns, the temperance campaigner, Mrs Ormiston Chant, and the Baptist Christian socialist pastor, Dr John Clifford, to join him on the platform. After opening with a prayer, Stead addressed the meeting for an hour, focusing largely on issues of child poverty and child welfare. He then moved a resolution, which was seconded by Clifford, 'that in order to promote the union of all who live for the service of all who suffer, this meeting proposes to form a National Social Union, with affiliated unions in every constituency, to act as a common centre of all the moral, social, industrial and philanthropic forces of the community'. The evening meeting centred upon an address by Stead on the theme of 'If Christ Came to London', in which he directed particular attention to women, including the growing public role of women as poor law guardians and members of district and county councils, and the potential of women to lead the way to large-scale improvements in social welfare provision.

Stead became secretary and the driving force of the new organisation. Indeed, for the London *Liberty Review* of 24 November 1894, the whole movement 'has

sprung, Minerva-like, from the vast brain of Mr. Stead'.⁶⁸ The National Social Union was active in the London school board elections of November 1894, devising, with the assistance of John Clifford and Sydney Webb, a set of questions for candidates. It also issued a national address, signed by leaders of several Church denominations, concerning the need to establish a 'new regime' in social welfare through the elections of poor law guardians and parish councils on 4 December.⁶⁹ In Newcastle upon Tyne, on 10 December 1894, Stead held afternoon and evening public meetings on the theme of 'If Christ Came to Newcastle' and inaugurated a Newcastle branch of the National Social Union. 'There was', he proclaimed, 'no better way of serving God than by getting Christian men and women to occupy places in their municipal bodies'.⁷⁰ In mid-December, Stead and the National Social Union called for a national census of the unemployed, and over the next several months they advanced an eclectic set of proposals for Church reunion, labour bureaus, free school meals, hospices for the terminally ill, holidays for urban children, and a statistical mapping of drunkenness and crime.⁷¹

But despite this promising start, Stead failed to win British Church support for his Civic Church programme. In particular, he encountered opposition from influential figures in the British 'social gospel' movement, especially from his own Nonconformist tradition. As we have seen, the influential Methodist pastor, social and political activist, and journalist, Hugh Price Hughes, had led the opposition to Stead's Civic Church at the Lucerne conference on Church unity in September 1893. Then on 10 May 1894, a highly critical editorial, 'If Christ Came ---', appeared in the leading Nonconformist newspaper, the *British Weekly*. The article was written by the editor, the prominent London-based, liberal Scottish Presbyterian journalist, William Robertson Nicoll. For Nicoll, *If Christ Came to Chicago!* was a dangerous work,

which not only represented ‘a condemnation of existing churches, and a plea for a new organisation of religion based on a new creed’, but which also called for this Civic Church to control municipal governments and manage political, social, economic and cultural life. Stead’s proposals amounted, Nicoll insisted, to a system of social engineering—a form of social engineering that was all the more ominous because it claimed the sanction of Christ. For Nicoll, Stead’s Civic Church was reminiscent of the ‘imperial aspirations’ of the medieval papacy – but now with those ‘imperial aspirations’ bolstered by the efficiency of the modern bureaucratic state. Such an authoritarian, interventionist, theocratic government would undermine the human freedom that was, for Nicoll, essential to Christianity. ‘The kind of public, pampered, supervised life’, Nicoll continued,

which MR. STEAD thinks of as perfect bliss would be to many of us so hateful that a garret in the East End, with freedom, would be infinitely preferable. It is enough to say that if men are to be made happy after this fashion, it will be because the divine has died in them and they have sunk to the level of beasts.⁷²

He suspected that a society based on Stead’s Civic Church, if it ever were actually imposed on the world, would, by its suppression of individual autonomy and responsibility, ‘pass quickly into the real Sodom’.

Stead responded to Nicoll with an indignant letter to the editor published in the *British Weekly* on 24 May, and with a lengthy signed article in the *Methodist Times* on the same day (although the *Methodist Times* declined to express any editorial support for Stead’s plan).⁷³ Stead claimed to have read Nicoll’s article with

‘amazement’: he could not see how Nicoll’s position could be called Christian. Do not Christians, he asked, pray ‘Thy kingdom come’, after the example of Jesus? Indeed, had not the Church been founded for the great work of achieving the kingdom of God on earth? Now that there was the real possibility of uniting modern social democracy and Christianity, was it not a Christian duty to make full use of this opportunity? Nicoll, in Stead’s view, endeavoured to set Christianity against both ‘social progress’ and the elevation of the labouring orders. As he caustically paraphrased Nicoll: ‘Long live pain! long live sorrow! long live hunger! In the name of Lord Jesus Christ, Amen’. It was, Stead insisted, not his own vision of the Civic Church, but rather Nicoll’s narrow notion of human freedom, that threatened to degrade working people to the ‘level of beasts’. The present capitalist system, Stead explained, meant for most working people ‘a constant preoccupation with the question, Shall I get enough to eat to keep my body and soul together’. And this in turn meant that most of the working class experienced a ‘lack of opportunities of enjoying books, society, music, and most of the things that constitute the culture of the mind’.⁷⁴

On 31 May, Nicoll fired back with another lengthy lead article in the *British Weekly*, entitled ‘If Chicago Came to Christ’. He repeated his opposition to Stead’s Civic Church, with its notion that the kingdom of God could be socially engineered through the mechanisms of the modern bureaucratic state. Church and state must be separate. ‘Civilisation’, Nicoll insisted, ‘must work out its own problems’, while the Church must focus on the individual’s relationship to God. He then turned to what he viewed as the fundamental weakness of Stead’s approach—that is, Stead’s willingness to use Christ’s Church as a means to further his social agenda, and to subordinate Christ to his social cause. ‘To be a Christian’, he reminded Stead, ‘is not to vaguely admire the character of CHRIST; not to take some of His sayings as stones

to fling at capitalists'. Rather, Nicoll proclaimed, 'To be a Christian means to be in contact with the living centre of force—to be alive in the Spirit'.⁷⁵

Others echoed Nicoll's criticisms. In an article in the *Contemporary Review* of September 1894, the liberal Anglican journalist and historian, Goldwyn Smith, derided Stead's plan 'to bring back the Churches to real Christianity by turning them into fraternities for the relief of the poor'. He could not 'agree with Mr. Stead that the Church would improve by identification with the trade-union'.⁷⁶ The Church of England clergyman and historian, Frederic Relton, denounced Stead's Civic Church idea in October 1894 in an article in the *Economic Review* – an organ of the Christian Social Union (an Anglican association for social investigation and moderate social reform).⁷⁷ While Relton supported many of the social reforms advocated in *If Christ Came to Chicago!* he could not accept Stead's claim that Christ 'would have regarded the City Council as the proper centre for His Operations'.⁷⁸ Stead's Civic Church, Relton insisted, betrayed 'an ignorance of the larger issues at stake that is as remarkable as it is disastrous'.⁷⁹ He compared the Civic Church to Satan's temptation of Christ in the wilderness, when Satan had offered Christ rule over 'all the kingdoms of the world'. For Relton, Christ's response to 'Mr. Stead's proposed Collectivist machinery of reform' would be 'Get thee hence, Satan!'⁸⁰ For the Anglican *Church Quarterly Review* of October 1894, Stead's *If Christ Came to Chicago!* contained 'phrases about sacred matters, and even about sacred Persons, which shock our sense of reverence'; it suspected Stead's account of the Churches in Chicago was unfair, and that his work did 'more harm than good'.⁸¹ In Birmingham, the leading Congregationalist minister and politician, R. W. Dale, also openly opposed Stead's programme of the Civic Church.⁸² Cardinal Manning had died in 1892, and his successor as Roman Catholic Primate of England, Cardinal Herbert Vaughan, took no

interest in Stead's Civic Church. With the exception of the Baptist socialist John Clifford, no major Church leader appears to have supported Stead's programme.

A contributing factor in this Christian opposition to Stead's Civic Church may have been his increasingly prominent advocacy of spiritualism, ghosts and the occult. In July 1893, Stead had launched, in collaboration with Annie Besant, a new journal, *Borderland*, which was dedicated to explorations of occult phenomena. Indeed, Nicoll had alluded to Stead's infatuation with the occult in his first assault on Stead's Civic Church in the *British Weekly*; and this had elicited a defensive response from Stead in his *Methodist Times* article of 24 May. In truth, many found Stead's religious views peculiar, not only his infatuation with 'spooks' but also his grandiloquent claims to 'be a Christ' or to represent the interests of 'all who suffer'. However, probably more serious were the concerns about Stead's call to unite the Church with the idea of an interventionist, collectivist state. While a growing number of late Victorian Christians embraced social reform and a vague 'Christian socialism', few, it seemed, were prepared to advocate the union of the Church and the social democratic State.

Without backing from Church leaders, the National Social Union soon lost public support. During the summer of 1895, Stead's *Review of Reviews* ceased reporting on the National Social Union, and that organisation folded. From late 1895, Stead took up other causes, shifting his attention to international affairs, including denunciations of Joseph Chamberlain's imperial policies, concern over the Armenian massacres, efforts to secure entente with Russia and the United States, and the movement for world peace. In 1898, he did return to the theme of the American city, publishing a critique of municipal corruption in the city of New York, entitled *Satan's Invisible World Displayed or, Despairing Democracy*, which he portrayed as a

companion piece to *If Christ Came to Chicago!* Significantly, this new work focused exclusively on political and social criticism. There were no references to Christ's social ideal, to the work of the Churches, or to the Civic Church.⁸³ Stead had relinquished his campaign to build cities of God through a new Church of the Future.

Stead's Civic Church programme, including *If Christ Came to Chicago!* represented an interesting episode in the movement of social Christianity, or the social gospel, on both sides of the Atlantic. It was a part of the larger North Atlantic 'Kingdom movement', in which preachers and theologians called on fellow Christians to work for the realisation of Christ's Kingdom within complex urban-industrial society, with all its class conflict, ethnic tensions, sexual exploitation and municipal corruption. Stead's Civic Church reflected both the optimism and pragmatism of the Kingdom movement. Through his Civic Church ideal, Stead sought to address arguably the greatest challenge facing late nineteenth-century social Christianity; that is, how to establish co-operative social reform links between Christian churches and progressive and socialist movements that were often profoundly hostile to institutional Christianity. Stead's Civic Church represented an innovative programme aimed at uniting religious bodies, labour organisations, voluntary charities and secular agencies by focusing on practical social reform activity at the local level. Such co-operation, he believed, would break down prejudices, ideological differences, sectarian animosities, ethnic hatreds and class hostility through shared civic action, civic responsibility and civic pride. He hoped that his Civic Church would revive in mature urban-industrial Britain – from the ground up – the sense of national religion that had once united society in medieval and early modern England; he envisaged a Britain that would find a new unity and sense of purpose through the spread of a progressive civic religion at the local level.

Stead's campaign for the Civic Church in Britain, then, was a serious effort to make the historic Christian Church once again a powerful force for social cohesion and improvement. None the less, despite the immense sales of *If Christ Came to Chicago*, the large attendances at his public meetings, the many local initiatives, and the initial success of the National Social Union, Stead's Civic Church encountered serious opposition from influential Christian voices and failed to mobilise a sustained public support. For many, Stead gave up too much Christian doctrine in his efforts to reduce Christianity to an essential message of love and service; his Civic Church lacked a theology. Stead, moreover, was a journalist and visionary, and not a constructive politician; he lacked the ability to lead a social reform movement, especially such a grandiose movement as he envisaged for his Civic Church. That said, *If Christ Came to Chicago!* and his efforts over nearly a decade to achieve a Civic Church in Britain did powerfully highlight the need for a shared sense of moral and spiritual purpose in a society that was fast losing its traditional Christian foundations.

¹ See, for example, G. Smith, 'If Christ Came to Chicago', *Contemporary Review* lxi (1894), 380; M. S. Gilliland, 'If Christ Came to Chicago', *International Journal of Ethics* v (1895), 406-7.

² For the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, see D. B. Downey, *A Season of Renewal: the Columbia Exhibition and Victorian America*, Westport, Connecticut, 2002; D. Burg, *Chicago's White City of 1893*, Lexington, Kentucky, 1976; R. Reid Badger, *The Great American Fair: the World's Columbian Exhibition and American culture*, Chicago, 1979.

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- ³ J. O. Baylen, 'A Victorian's "Crusade" in Chicago, 1893-1894', *Journal of American History* li (1964), 433; Smith, 'When Stead Came to Chicago', 199.
- ⁴ W. T. Stead, 'My First Visit to America', *Review of Reviews* (April 1894), 411.
- ⁵ J. McKay, *The Kirk and the Kingdom: a century of social tension in Scottish social theology, 1830-1929*, Edinburgh, 2012, 26-42; P. Jones, *The Christian Socialist Revival, 1877-1914*, Princeton, 1968, 164-224; Robert T. Handy, 'George D. Herron and the Kingdom Movement', *Church History* xix (1950), 97-115; C. H. Evans, *The Kingdom is Always but Coming: a life of Walter Rauschenbusch*, Waco, Texas, 2010, 101-11; C. H. Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism 1865-1915*, New Haven, 1940, 132-4.
- ⁶ F. Whyte, *The Life of W. T. Stead*, London, 1925, ii, 39-53; Baylen, 'A Victorian's "Crusade" in Chicago, 1893-1894', 418-34; D. B. Downey, 'William Stead and Chicago: A Victorian Jeremiah in the Windy City', *Mid-America* lxxviii (1987), 153-66; Gary Scott Smith, 'When Stead Came to Chicago: The "Social Gospel Novel" and the Chicago Civic Federation', *American Presbyterians* lxxviii (1990), 193-205.
- ⁷ Whyte, *Life of W. T. Stead*, ii, 247.
- ⁸ J. S. Stephenson, *The Reverend William Stead and his Family*, Newcastle Upon Tyne, 1987.
- ⁹ For an accounts of Stead's style of investigative journalism, see R. A. Schults, *Crusader in Babylon: W. T. Stead and the Pall Mall Gazette*, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1972; J. O. Baylen, 'The "New Journalism" in Late Victorian Britain', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* xviii (1972), 37-85; W. Sydney Robinson, *Muckraker: the scandalous life and times of W. T. Stead, Britain's first investigative journalist*, London, 2012.

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- ¹⁰ [R. Blathwayt] (ed.), *Interview with Mr W. T. Stead on the Church of the Future*, London, 1891, 14.
- ¹¹ [W. T. Stead]. 'A Church "Exceeding Broad"', *Pall Mall Gazette* (10 June 1886).
- ¹² W. T. Stead, *The Pope and the New Era, being letters from the Vatican in 1889*, London, 1890, 16-17.
- ¹³ [Blathwayt] (ed.), *Interview with Mr W. T. Stead on the Church of the Future*, 15.
- ¹⁴ Annie Besant to W. T. Stead, 1 January 1888, Stead Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge, STED 1/6.
- ¹⁵ Annie Besant to W. T. Stead, 4 March 1888, Stead Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge, STED 1/6.
- ¹⁶ See Annie Besant to W. T. Stead, 26 March, 1 April, 17 April 1888, Stead Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge, STED 1/6; W. T. Stead, 'Mrs. Annie Besant', in W. T. Stead, *Character Sketches*, London, [1891], 147-67.
- ¹⁷ Stead, 'Mrs Annie Besant', 164.
- ¹⁸ [W. T. Stead], *The Salvation Army and its Social Scheme*, London, 1890, 2.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ²⁰ For an account of this relationship, see J. O. Baylen, 'Cardinal Manning and W. T. Stead: notes of an unpublished interview', *Catholic Historical Review* *xlvi* (1963), 498-507.
- ²¹ W. T. Stead, 'Cardinal Manning', in W. T. Stead, *Character Sketches*, 144.
- ²² H. S. Lunn, *Chapters from my Life with Special Reference to Reunion*, London, 1918, 132.
- ²³ Stead, 'Cardinal Manning', 145.

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- ²⁴ Stead, *The Pope and the New Era*, 146.
- ²⁵ Lunn, *Chapters from my Life*, 132-3.
- ²⁶ Quoted in J. W. Robertson Scott, *The Life and Death of a Newspaper*, London, 1952, 152.
- ²⁷ For Stead's aims for the *Review of Reviews*, see J. O. Baylen, 'W. T. Stead as Publisher and Editor of the *Review of Reviews*', *Victorian Periodicals Review* xii (1979), 70-84.
- ²⁸ [W. T. Stead], 'To All English Speaking Folk', *Review of Reviews* (January 1890), 18.
- ²⁹ Quoted in Robertson Scott, *The Life and Death of a Newspaper*, 155.
- ³⁰ 'Mr Stead's Civic Church', *Bristol Mercury and Daily Post* (8 December 1891).
- ³¹ 'Mr W. T. Stead at Cardiff', *Western Mail*, Cardiff (8 February 1892)
- ³² 'The Civic Church: what it was, and what it may be', *Review of Reviews* (August 1892), 157.
- ³³ 'Towards the Civic Church: a report of progress', *Review of Reviews* (March 1893), 309-14.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 311-12.
- ³⁵ Downey, *A Season of Renewal*, 148-60; R. H. Seager, *The World's Parliament of Religions*, Bloomington, Indiana, 1995.
- ³⁶ W. T. Stead, 'The Civic Church' in *The World's Parliament of Religions*, ed. J. H. Barrows, London, 1893, ii, 1209-15.
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- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1213.
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- 41 Downey, *A Season of Renewal*, 159.
- 42 C. Oldstone-Moore, 'The Forgotten Origins of the Ecumenical Movement in England: the Grindelwald conferences, 1892-95', *Church History* lxx (2001), 73-97; R. Rouse and S. C. Neill (eds.), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948*, London, 1954), 338-41.
- 43 [W. T. Stead], 'The Chronicles of the Civic Church: the forthcoming conference at Lucerne', *Review of Reviews* (August 1893), 186-9.
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- 46 'The Church Congress at Birmingham', *The Daily Paper* (4 October 1893), 6; for Stead's sense of religious purpose behind this venture, see Whyte, *Life of W. T. Stead*, ii, 58.
- 47 Stead, 'My First Visit to America', 410.
- 48 Ibid., 410-11.
- 49 For a thorough account of these meetings, see Downey, 'William Stead and Chicago', 159-61.
- 50 W. T. Stead to Reginald Brett, 22 November 1893, Rosebery Papers, National Library of Scotland, MS 10006, fos. 157-8.
- 51 Handy, 'George D. Herron and the Kingdom Movement', 104.
- 52 W. T. Stead to Reginald Brett, 25 December 1893, Rosebery Papers, National Library of Scotland, MS 10007, fol. 3.
- 53 W. T. Stead, *If Christ Came to Chicago! a plea for the union of all who love in the service of all who suffer*, London, 1894, 59-60.

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- 55 Ibid., 264.
- 56 Ibid., 335.
- 57 Ibid., 334.
- 58 Ibid., 401.
- 59 Ibid., 401.
- 60 Ibid., 434.
- 61 Lord Rosebery to W. T. Stead, 29 April 1894, W. T. Stead, 'Memo of conversation with Lord Rosebery over lunch on 21 May 1894', Stead Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge, STED 1/62; Lord Salisbury to W. T. Stead, 1 May 1894, Stead Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge, STED 1/63.
- 62 W. T. Stead to J. Burns, 24 April 1894, John Burns Papers, British Library, Add Mss 46287, fol. 228.
- 63 'Sunderland: Mr Stead's Civic Church', *Methodist Times* (19 April 1894); 'Mr W. T. Stead in Leeds: an appeal for a more practical Christianity', *Leed's Mercury* (9 July 1894).
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⁶⁸ *The Liberty Review*, London (24 November 1894).

⁶⁹ *Daily News*, London (19 November 1894); *Leed's Mercury* (23 November 1894); *Bristol Mercury* (27 November 1894).

⁷⁰ *Newcastle Weekly Courant* (15 December 1894).

⁷¹ *Reynold's Newspaper*, London (23 December 1894); W. T. Stead to Lord Rosebery, 19 December 1894, Rosebery Papers, National Library of Scotland, MS 10100, fol. 130; 'The National Social Union', *Review of Reviews* (January 1895), pp. 66-9; (June 1895), p. 557-60.

⁷² [W. Robertson Nicoll, 'If Christ Came --- ', *British Weekly* (10 May 1894).

⁷³ W. T. Stead, 'If Christ Came. To the Editor', *British Weekly* (24 May 1894); W. T. Stead. "If Christ Came": A Reply to the *British Weekly*', *Methodist Times* (24 May 1894).

⁷⁴ Stead. ' "If Christ Came": A Reply to the *British Weekly*'.

⁷⁵ [W. Robertson Nicoll], 'If Chicago Came to Christ', *British Weekly* (31 May 1894).

⁷⁶ G. Smith, 'If Christ Came to Chicago', *Contemporary Review* lxxvi (1894), 380-89, at p. 386.

⁷⁷ F. Relton, 'Is the Individualist or the Collectivist View of Social Progress More in Accordance with the Teaching of Christ?' *Economic Review* iv (1894), 499-518. For the connection of the *Economic Review* to the Christian Social Union, see Jones, *The Christian Socialist Revival 1877-1914*, 181.

⁷⁸ Relton' Is the Individualist or the Collectivist View...?', 510.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 511.

80 Ibid., 517-18.

81 'If Christ Came to Chicago!' *Church Quarterly Review* xxxix (1894-95), 253-4.

82 'Recollections of the Late Dr R. W. Dale', *Westminster Review*, cxliv (1895), 66.

83 W. T. Stead, *Satan's Invisible World Displayed or, Despairing Democracy: a study of Greater New York* (London, 1898).