

Washington Gladden Balanced Social Activism, Spiritual Focus

Yin and yang are represented by a circle with a curved line dividing each half with a small circle in each half.

In the yin half exists a little bit of yang, represented by the small circle. In the yang half exists a little bit of yin, again represented by a small circle.

Yin and yang are connected. Neither is pure, for each has a bit of the other within it. Together both halves form a circle. Apart from one another, they are incomplete.

Yin and yang are complementary forces that interact to form a dynamic system in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

One side is white, with a black dot within. The other side is black, with a white dot within.

This design from Chinese philosophy illustrates the interweaving of two things, like light and darkness, good and evil or masculinity and femininity.

A case could be made that there is a yin and yang of social activism and spiritual centeredness.

When whole, the yin of activism has a circle of spiritual centeredness within it. The yang of spiritual centeredness has a circle of social activism within it.

It is possible that some have only activism, without a spiritual centeredness. They are not whole. It is possible that some have only a spiritual centeredness without a social activism. Neither are they whole.

One without the other is incomplete. Activism - on behalf of the good, the just and the right - and a spiritual centeredness - rooted in being a follower of the Shepherd - are interwoven.

Washington Gladden was an enlightened model of the yin and yang of activism and spiritual centeredness.

Gladden grew up on a farm, worked in a small-town newspaper office and attended Williams College.

After serving as religious editor of the New York Independent (1871-75), he served as pastor to churches in New York, Massachusetts and Ohio.

Gladden's first call was to State Street Congregational Church in Brooklyn, New York; his second was to the Congregational church at Morrisania, New York; his third was North Adams, Massachusetts; his fourth was to the North Congregational Church in Springfield, Massachusetts; and then he became the pastor of the First Congregational Church in Columbus, Ohio, in 1882.

He served in that position for 36 years. At Williams College, Gladden wrote its alma mater song, "The Mountains," and served as one of the editors of the "Pilgrim Hymnal."

The website for Gladden's church in Columbus labels him a "social gospel giant." Indeed, he was.

His [former church's website](#) tells how "Washington Gladden (1836-1918) was one of the earliest and most influential proponents of the Social Gospel Movement.

"The Social Gospel Movement was a religious movement that grew out of the industrial and urban revolutions of the late 19th century.

"Its advocates believed that salvation was the symbiotic relationship between the personal and the social. One could not separate one's own personal salvation from the salvation of the world. In practice, the Social Gospel meant everyday service to others and a commitment to social justice for all."

Gladden was a social activist.

One [biography](#) notes that he "opposed both socialism and classical economic theory and sought to apply 'Christian law' to social problems. Some consider him the first American clergyman of note to approve of unionization.

"In 1904, he was elected moderator of the National Council of Congregational Churches and soon afterward made the startling proposal that the denomination's foreign mission board should reject John D. Rockefeller's gift of \$100,000 on the ground that it was 'tainted money.'

“Gladden, who stressed the simple and direct nature of the gospel as well as its practicality, wrote some 40 books, among them ‘Applied Christianity’ (1887) and ‘Social Salvation’ (1901).”

Gladden is considered one of the earliest founders of the Social Gospel Movement. And yet, his yin of activism was interwoven with the yang of his spiritual centeredness.

One of the achievements for which Gladden is best known is the hymn and prayer of spirituality he wrote titled “O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee.”

*“O Master, let me walk with Thee
In lowly paths of service free;
Tell me Thy secret, help me bear
The strain of toil, the fret of care.*

*Help me the slow of heart to move
By some clear, winning word of love;
Teach me the wayward feet to stay,
And guide them in the homeward way.*

*Teach me Thy patience; still with Thee
In closer, dearer company,
In work that keeps faith sweet and strong,
In trust that triumphs over wrong.*

*In hope that sends a shining ray
Far down the future’s broad’ning way,
In peace that only Thou canst give,
With Thee, O Master, let me live.”*

Gladden’s hymn, published in 1879, expresses in simple language what people of faith feel: a need to walk with God, to feel God’s presence, to have God guide and to have God help them through the challenging struggles of life.

It is a hymn but also a prayer: “With Thee, O Master, let me live.”

Behind this mountaintop of spiritual centeredness, one can find the witness of a champion for social justice.

Gladden's gospel was rooted in the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, which led him to be both an advocate for "the least of these" and to desire a closer walk with God.

Gladden described the yin and yang of his faith [this way](#): "To be in harmony with God's purposes, to be open to His suggestions, to be in conscious fellowship with Him - this is religion on its Godward side."

Gladden's hymn is a soothing meditation, really a prayer, asking God to let the singer walk with God. Those are the intimate and memorable moments with the Divine - walking with God.

A divorced dad told how he was given two weeks in the summer to be with his young son.

With such a short period of time, he wanted to make the most of the time they had together, so he planned each day carefully to include a meaningful activity like camping, boating, miniature golf, enjoying ice cream, road trips, museums, movies, theater, concerts and everything else he could think of.

At the end of every day, he and his son took a walk and reflected upon the activity of the day and the time they spent together.

On his final day with his son, he asked, "Of the things we did, what did you like the best?"

His son needed no time to think and blurted out, "Our walks."

It was neither the expensive nor the elaborate, but the simple moments of walking together that etched in his son's mind their most intimate experience.

So it is with you and God: Walking with God, feeling close to God and feeling the inhale and exhale of God by your side walking with you.

But that walk with God is only half of the yin and yang. To be complete and made whole, the yin and yang include an interweaving of social activism and spiritual centeredness.

Social activism and spirituality are both well-served when what is wrought in the one is woven into the fabric of the other.

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