

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

Spring 1999

**Review of *The Social Gospel of E. Nicholas Comfort: Founder of the Oklahoma School of Religion* By Robert C. Cottrell**

Leslie Hewes

*University of Nebraska, Lincoln*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Hewes, Leslie, "Review of *The Social Gospel of E. Nicholas Comfort: Founder of the Oklahoma School of Religion* By Robert C. Cottrell" (1999). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1549.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1549>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

*The Social Gospel of E. Nicholas Comfort: Founder of the Oklahoma School of Religion.* By Robert C. Cottrell. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997. Photographs, notes, selected bibliography, index. xxi + 338 pp. \$34.95.

Early in the autumn of 1924, when I attended my first Saturday night open house at the First Presbyterian Church in Norman, Oklahoma, the newly appointed student pastor, Nick Comfort, made me feel at home by saying, "We are both freshmen." Next year, after I had satisfied most freshman requirements, I enrolled in a course on comparative religion at the University of Oklahoma taught by Rev. Comfort.

The social gospel, as pointed out by Cottrell repeatedly, emphasized the "fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man." As espoused by Comfort, the gospel was egalitarian, without color barriers, non-violent, non-sectarian, and based on education and persuasion. It rejected the tenet of rugged individualism that private gain was a worthy human objective.

The limited attention Cottrell gives to Comfort's several years as student pastor for about five hundred students is a considerable gap. For many of these students, their close contacts were probably among the most last-

ing effects of Comfort's teaching of the social gospel. I, for one, was "sold" to the point that Comfort urged me to become a preacher. Another small but surprising failure for a historian is the rather fuzzy chronology. For example, we are not told that Rev. John B. Thompson, a friend and supporter of Comfort, arrived in Norman about a dozen years after Comfort.

The Oklahoma School of Religion is emphasized, as it should be. It was Rev. Comfort's main concern for nearly twenty years, after he resigned his duties as student pastor in 1927. Comfort was director and one of its teachers on a staff that included a Jew, a Catholic, and representatives of several Protestant denominations. He also took time to serve as chaplain at the asylum and on the Norman Board of Education, organize the Norman Forum, write a column for the student paper, secure the passage of a teacher retirement pension for state teachers, and work with anti-war groups and various organizations concerned with helping the downtrodden.

Many of Comfort's actions and statements were very unpopular, especially in wartime. Nevertheless, Cottrell concludes that "Had he been willing to curb his outspoken ways and avoid controversies, perhaps the school would have been able to survive with his name attached to it"; but he was unable to compromise on matters of principle. Comfort would probably approve the conclusion that "the Rev. Nick Comfort's educational ministry had succeeded in spreading his version of the social gospel to untold thousands whose lives were thereby enriched." In the opinion of this reviewer, he would have thought it all worthwhile.

Cottrell's treatment is a sympathetic but objective account of an uncompromising, dedicated man of God whose accomplishments fell short of his vision.

LESLIE HEWES

Department of Geography, Emeritus  
University of Nebraska, Lincoln