

## Review Essay

### Joseph Tuckerman, Model of Charity\*

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Early nineteenth-century America was a wellspring of social reform. Figures such as Lyman Beecher and Dorothea Dix led movements to combat alcoholism and reform mental institutions. Joseph Tuckerman (1778–1840) could be said to have been the first of the great poor-law reformers. After twenty-five years of parish work, this Unitarian minister began an “outdoor church” in 1826, tending to the needs of the poor of Boston. During the remaining years of his life, he worked as something like an urban missionary, although he eschewed that name and chose to be called a minister at large, issuing periodic reports to those who supported his work. He also continued to study and write on the subject of poverty and its relief; he was instrumental in the founding of the Association of Benevolent Societies of Boston and the Boston Society for the Prevention of Pauperism.

For most of the nineteenth century, Tuckerman’s work was seen uncritically as exemplifying Christian love for the disadvantaged. He distinguished between those who deserved support because they were either completely or partially unable to provide for themselves and those whose real need was some form of discipline, while seeking always to bring people into community with others. By the turn of the twentieth century, with the rise of progressivism, his work and the work of the private-charity system in general came to be criticized for focusing on the moral shortcomings of the poor, as though they—and not society—were responsible for their behavior and as though they did not have a right to a certain level of support.

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\* Jedediah Mannis, *Joseph Tuckerman and the Outdoor Church* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009).

With the publication of *Joseph Tuckerman and the Outdoor Church* by Jedediah Mannis, Tuckerman's story has changed yet again. While he and the private-charity system had most recently been portrayed as the problematic precursors of the welfare state, we are now told that he prefigured liberal Protestants of today who minister to the homeless poor without judgment. This essay reexamines Tuckerman's ministry in view of this recent publication. It begins with a cursory review of the book and then proceeds to examine the intellectual nexus of Tuckerman's time with respect to poverty, his own views on the causes and relief of poverty, and the evolution of the assessment of his work and the nineteenth-century private-charity system in general.

## Mannis's Filtering of Tuckerman

Repeatedly, Mannis filters the ministry of Tuckerman so as not to offend the sensibilities of contemporary liberal Protestants and even to recreate Tuckerman as a contemporary liberal Protestant. For example, Mannis says that Tuckerman advocated more government provision of social services, "seeking government involvement and expense" (20), although Tuckerman, in fact, advocated private charity rather than government relief. Mannis reconciles these seemingly contradictory views by arguing that Tuckerman did not see government as competent to administer relief and that government would not have to provide relief if private citizens were more generous. The implication that Mannis would have the reader draw is that because private citizens are not generous enough or more competent than the government there must be government relief.

For Tuckerman and the private-charity system, the seeming contradiction identified by Mannis was reconciled in an entirely different way. The private-charity system was seen as part of a larger social system in which the government (1) maintains law, (2) intervenes on probable cause in what are normally family affairs (for example, to protect battered wives or abused and neglected children), (3) provides institutionalized care for those entirely bereft of family and unable to do so for themselves, and (4) supplies fraternal or charitable support—all in the context of a private property, free-enterprise economy.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, advocating that the government perform its roles in the overarching social system was not seen to be a contradiction. To illustrate, Tuckerman, who had tremendous sympathy for children whose development was neglected by their parents, argued that a municipal officer, imbued with the power of law, be appointed to compel a child's school attendance or else to remove the child from his parents for placement in a reform school.<sup>2</sup>

Mannis's treatment displays a pattern of distortion, by not mentioning the role of work in distinguishing the deserving from the undeserving poor, by singling out in Tuckerman criticisms of private property and the free-enterprise system, by diminishing the success of the private-charity system, and by recasting Tuckerman's views so as to justify the political agenda of contemporary liberal Protestants. (See the chart at the end of this article for a catalog of specific errors.) Ultimately, Mannis stands Tuckerman's outdoor church upside down. Tuckerman, in fact, continually railed against indiscriminate giving, opposed the characterization of material support for the poor as a right, and warned against enabling individuals to lead lives of idleness and intemperance without work or friendship.

## The Intellectual Nexus

Tuckerman is described by his foremost biographer, Daniel McColgan, as a disciple of the great Scottish poor-law reformer Thomas Chalmers, and therefore, indirectly, a disciple of Adam Smith and Robert Malthus.<sup>3</sup> Recognizing the influence of these two thinkers is an important element in understanding Tuckerman's thought and work.

Malthus is of course most famous for his law of population. He is less well known, nowadays, for its corollary, the iron law of wages. Malthus argued that any increase in wages results in an increased survival rate of the children of the working class, which in turn leads to an increase in the supply of labor that restores the prior wage rate. Wages, therefore, tend toward the level consistent with the subsistence of workers and their families. Chalmers, Tuckerman, and others in the early nineteenth-century private-charity movement were Malthusian insofar as they accepted the iron law of wages.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, one reason the early nineteenth-century proponents of the private-charity system argued for ending government handouts to the dependent poor was to uphold wages or else (they believed), wages would fall below the subsistence level, multiplying hardship on a more deserving class, the independent poor.

If the influence of Malthus' iron law of wages on the nineteenth-century private-charity system has been largely forgotten, it is as though the influence of Smith was never known. Smith's "other" great work is *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.<sup>5</sup> Whereas in *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith pursues the implication of self-interest, in *Moral Sentiments* he seems to develop a completely different form of interest, namely, sympathy.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, for some time, readers of Smith saw these two works as independent of, if not antithetical to, each other. However, the publication of other of Smith's works, especially *Lectures on Jurisprudence*,<sup>7</sup> makes clear that his two great works were part of an integral whole.<sup>8</sup>

The key insight of *Moral Sentiments* for the private-charity system was that much of what forms our moral sentiments is learned experientially in our social contacts with each other. Hence came the emphasis of the nineteenth-century private-charity system on visiting the poor and a new insight into the relationships of the poor with employers, landlords, churches, and other hierarchical and fraternal forms of community. Just as Tuckerman believed that even the “most corrupted and dissolute of the poor people”<sup>9</sup> could be perfected, Smith believed that even “the greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society” could develop sympathy for others.<sup>10</sup>

William Dixon and David Wilson observe that, for Chalmers, character development required the formation of a certain kind of “self” through “social relationships” and interactions of a person with others.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, man in isolation, not engaged with others through work and other marketplace relations nor engaged with others through voluntary community, would be antisocial. The private-charity system sought to “elevate” the poor, promoting among them the values of free, self-responsible citizens; hence, the title of the edited volume of Tuckerman’s quarterly and semiannual reports: “On the Elevation of the Poor.” This project was especially crucial in view of the waves of nineteenth-century immigrants, many of whom were not cultured to assume the lives of free, self-responsible citizens. Therefore, the editor of that volume wrote, “Poverty, crime and pauperism there are in Boston, but for the most part they may be regarded not as chronic nor as epidemic, but as, to a large extent, importations from without, or abnormal and exceptional.”<sup>12</sup>

## The Causes and Relief of Poverty

The nineteenth-century private-charity system emerged to replace the former system that had been imported from England. It involved ministering to the poor through town governments and established churches with the support of a poor tax or a mandatory tithe. Although no right to support was involved, there was the expectation that those who were unable to provide for themselves by reason of sickness, old age, or some other misfortune would be supported by the community.<sup>13</sup>

The expectation that the local community would support its poor eventually became, in Massachusetts, a state-enforced mandate on the towns to support the “town poor,” as determined by residency. The state reimbursed towns for the “state’s poor,” whose residency could not be fixed on any particular town. This complex system led to abuses, including a growing number of dependent poor who came to view state reimbursement of their support as giving them a right to

be supported. The towns had little interest in resisting this demand; they merely passed the cost on to the state.<sup>14</sup> The first commission to examine this system, headed by Josiah Quincy, described the shortcomings of the system and recommended that the local poorhouses be supervised by the state.<sup>15</sup> Ten years later, Tuckerman, as part of a second commission, examined the system, found it to be in even worse shape, and recommended that the law mandating town support of their poor and state reimbursement of the state's poor simply be ended,<sup>16</sup> along with the establishment of one or two "state farms" for sturdy beggars, rogues, vagabonds, and the like.<sup>17</sup>

Tuckerman, in describing this system in his periodic reports, said that "the very law which requires the support of course invests the poor with a legal right to this support. It thus creates a new and supplemental right additional to the natural and moral rights which were antecedent to it."<sup>18</sup> He also reported that "the applicants for public alms are greatly increased by the knowledge of the right to alms when they think they have need of them."<sup>19</sup> Tuckerman's recommendations were deflected by the state legislature, perhaps because of the interest of the towns in continuing to receive reimbursement for their support of the state's poor. Only in 1854 did the state act on these reports by lifting the mandate on the towns and erecting three state poorhouses.<sup>20</sup>

Tuckerman attributed the observed rise in dependency to a number of factors, including the rise of cities. He contrasted the urban scene with the rural: "In the country, every individual has a sufficient prominence to be known to almost every other individual in his neighborhood."<sup>21</sup> In a city, there are divisions by class, interests, and tastes, and individuals are unknown even to others within their class. Shame and dejection are diminished, both with regard to viciousness and crime and the suffering associated with virtuous poverty. The result was that what happens naturally in a rural setting, in terms of people knowing and upholding each other, does not happen without organized effort in the city. Tuckerman went on to say that cities attract the idle, the intemperate, and the profligate; that people will, from time to time, be without employment; and that even the poor could afford "ardent spirits."<sup>22</sup>

Tuckerman distinguished among the poor. Some of them he described as the idle, intemperate, and improvident poor who, he said, should support themselves through labor. Others he described as the virtuous poor—those made poor by disease, death of the breadwinner, or old age and who should be permanently supported. In addition, there were the occasional poor, due to the lack of employment and sickness, who should be temporarily assisted. With regard to orphaned, deserted, or neglected children (and even those whom he described as "actually vicious"), they had a strong claim on society because society had failed either

to help their parents raise them well or to have them removed from parents who were either incapable of or unwilling to raise them well.<sup>23</sup>

In the mid-1830s, Tuckerman was instrumental in the formation of two charities, one of which—the Association of Benevolent Societies of Boston—was to coordinate or organize the efforts of some two dozen benevolent associations; the other—the Boston Society for the Prevention of Pauperism—was more of a charity-supported employment agency than a charity *per se*. Together, these two bodies sought to make charity more effective, to suppress begging and indiscriminate almsgiving, to provide work rather than relief to those capable of providing for themselves, and to uphold the conditions of the independent poor.<sup>24</sup>

While the above discussion outlines the ways in which Tuckerman attempted to discriminate between the deserving and the undeserving poor and how he attempted to use both the police powers of the state and private charity to uphold the conditions and shape the values of the poor, it would be remiss not to point out his insistence on the goodness of, as well as the moral duty of, responding to our dependence on each other:

There are times, occasions, circumstances in which he [any individual] needs ... in innumerable ways ... the aid of others. He has physical, intellectual and moral weaknesses, and wants and tendencies that lead to a necessary and widely extended dependence upon men and things about him. And our common Father intended this dependence. It is a principle of the constitution of the individual and of society in this world.<sup>25</sup>

Tuckerman believed that we were all dependent on each other. He “considered every man (rich and poor alike) to be his ‘brother’s keeper.’”<sup>26</sup>

## The Swing of the Pendulum

As was mentioned above, throughout the nineteenth-century, Tuckerman’s ministry to the poor was seen uncritically as exemplifying Christian love, but, in the course of the following century, he and the private-charity system came to be described as problematic forerunners of the welfare state.

In 1902, Robert Hunter argued that the private-charity system, at the time embodied in the Charity Organization Society, reflected the principles of classical economics, *laissez faire*, and the idea that individuals should be treated as free and self-responsible. The emerging welfare system, embodied at the time in the settlement-house movement, concerned itself with addressing the material needs of the poor while also addressing the underlying causes of poverty.<sup>27</sup>

“The fundamental ideals of the Charity Organization Society were formulated at a time when the Manchester school of economics swayed the minds of the English people,” Hunter wrote, and in which “the individual causes of distress and poverty were emphasized.”<sup>228</sup> He continued, “The settlements, on the other hand, were born in an era of new economic thought ... when the unemployed marched in great hordes to denounce capital and to protest against social conditions which, as they say, forced them into poverty.”<sup>229</sup> While those in the Charity Organization Society in Chicago worried Hamlet-like about whether “to do or not to do,” concerned as they were about the long-term consequences of dependency, those in the settlement houses were unbothered by such concerns. They simply looked to the Charity Organization Society to ensure that relief for the poor was forthcoming “quickly and sufficiently.”<sup>230</sup>

As the welfare state came to replace the private-charity system, retrospective judgments by progressives ranged from begrudged respect for the efforts of the nineteenth-century reformers to ridicule of them. In spite of the limited success of the Mother’s Pension movement prior to the Great Depression, Mark H. Leff says the movement was opposed only by “unconvinced charity workers and half-dormant conservatives.”<sup>231</sup> While social workers may “regard the charity organization movement of the late nineteenth century as the beginning of their profession,” James Leiby explains, “from the perspective of the of the twentieth-century welfare state, it is an embarrassment.”<sup>232</sup> Grappling with the abject failures of the welfare state either to eradicate poverty or to prevent the deterioration of cities, Michael B. Katz says that the nineteenth-century reformers had tried “to improve the character of poor people rather than to attack the material sources of their misery.”<sup>233</sup>

Now, with Mannis, the pendulum has swung yet again. By filtering Tuckerman’s actual story, he proposes that this particular nineteenth-century reformer was not an “embarrassment” to the liberal Protestants of today, he was not “unconvinced” or “half-dormant,” and he did not choose only to improve the character of the poor while ignoring the underlying causes of their poverty. Instead we are led to believe that Tuckerman was, if not a contemporary liberal Protestant himself, then something akin to that: somebody who by not being concerned with the elevation of the poor was truly Christian. A more accurate understanding of the actual historical character reveals a different figure, one who balanced concern for addressing the immediate needs of the poor with concern for restoring the poor to brotherhood, seeing them not merely as objects of our pity but as potentially brother’s keepers themselves.

**Selected Statements from *Joseph Tuckerman and the Outdoor Church*  
by Jedediah Mannis, with Corrections as Necessary**

<b>Page</b>	<b>Statement</b>	<b>Correction</b>
20	Tuckerman advocated more government provision of social services, seeking “greater government involvement and expense,” although he advocated private charity rather than government relief.	Tuckerman distinguished the police function of the state from the provision of charity.
24	For Tuckerman, the primary purpose of Christian charity is moral uplift; material improvement is merely a consequence.	
24	Tuckerman did not “dogmatically ascribe poverty to immorality.”	None of the nineteenth-century reformers did this (Schwartz, xvi).
25	Tuckerman distinguished between the undeserving and the deserving poor via the work test.	
27	Quotes Tuckerman ( <i>Elevation</i> , 94–95), “the more favored classes should strongly feel that they have a common nature with those in less favored conditions....”	Leaves out, “he is to be the advisor, and to seek the improvement of parents and children, to aid the parents in keeping their children at school, and in placing them out as apprentices, to promote temperance, industry, order and cleanliness among them....”
28	Tuckerman (see <i>Principles</i> , 88–89) “never wavered in his belief in the perfectibility of even the most corrupted and dissolute of the poor people.”	Leaves out, “Your very bounty therefore may have been the most effectual of all ministrations, not only to the perpetuity of their dependence, but to the increase of their debasement” (96).
34	Chalmers’ reform of the poor laws in Glasgow was a failure.	<i>But</i> Chalmers’ reform of the poor laws in St. John’s Parish was a tremendous success and eventually led to Parliament’s reform of the poor laws.



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- 36 Tuckerman (*Elevation*, 101) partially blamed the wealthy for poverty, including the tendency to monopolize and the influence of extravagance on the poor. This was a criticism of Europe, with its princes and established churches, not necessarily a criticism of the wealth forthcoming with free enterprise (100–101). For Tuckerman, “monopoly” referred to government grants of exclusive franchises to certain businesses and to the guild system that prevailed in certain places; again, not to free enterprise. For Tuckerman’s analysis of the causes of poverty in the United States, see text.
- 37 Tuckerman (*Principles*, 246) believed rich and poor to be moral equals. Tuckerman argued that *all who worked* were moral equals (247–49) and, by reason of specialization and trade, connected with each other in the global economy (250).
- 37 Tuckerman (*Principles*, 312) says the right to accumulate property is limited by the needs of the poor. Tuckerman says this is “to be left to the individual conscience,” making it a moral issue as opposed to a legal issue.
- 37 Tuckerman advocated a Puritan-style just wage for working women. Tuckerman advocated that employers be generous in wages, but he did not think the level of wages was most important. “However, it is never to be forgotten ... that the most effectual means by which we can improve their condition is by improving their character” (McColgan, 166–67).
- 40 Tuckerman was “lonely” and “extreme” in advocating a repeal of the Massachusetts law requiring towns to support their indigents. Tuckerman was appointed to a commission to investigate the matter and wrote the commission’s report. The commission’s recommendations were indeed deflected by the legislature. *But*, with continued agitation, the state eventually replaced the system examined by Tuckerman with one featuring state poorhouses (Kelso, 136).

## Notes

1. For recent book length works on the nineteenth-century private-charity system, see Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Poverty and Compassion: The Moral Imagination of the Late Victorians* (New York: Knopf, 1991), whose focus is England; and, Joel Schwartz, *Fighting Poverty with Virtue: Moral Reform and America's Urban Poor, 1825–2000* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), whose focus is the United States.
2. Joseph Tuckerman, *On the Elevation of the Poor: A Selection of His Reports as Minister at Large in Boston*, ed. E. E. Hale (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1874), 116.
3. Daniel T. McColgan, *Joseph Tuckerman: Pioneer in American Social Work* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1940), 93. Elsewhere on pages 430–32, McColgan identifies works by Chalmers, Malthus, and Jean Baptiste Say (whose treatise on political economy was the most popular in the United States at the time) as “much perused” by Tuckerman.
4. Even so, Tuckerman disagreed with Malthus regarding the tendency of the working class to reproduce to the point where population was only checked by famine, disease, war, and the like. Tuckerman thought that, with education, all could learn to be self-controlled with regard to reproduction (McColgan, *Joseph Tuckerman*, 216–17). In fact, we have seen the reproduction rates among the indigenous populations of high-income countries fall considerably, although addressing whether this is because of education or the opportunity cost of children is beyond this article. With regard to the iron law of wages, sometime during the nineteenth century, economists came to see that wages were a function of capital as well as the admixture of labor and land so that were capital to increase at a faster rate than labor wages would rise.
5. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie, vol. 1 of the *Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982).
6. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, vol. 2 of the *Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1981).
7. Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, ed. R. L. Meek, D. D. Raphael, and P. G. Stein, vol. 5 of the *Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982).
8. See, for example, Jeffrey T. Young, *Economics as a Moral Science: The Political Economy of Adam Smith* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 1997).
9. Joseph Tuckerman, *Principles and Results of the Ministry at Large in Boston* (Boston: James Munroe, 1838), 88–89.
10. Smith, *Moral Sentiments*, 2.

11. William Dixon and David Wilson, "Thomas Chalmers: The Market, Moral Conduct, and Social Order," *History of Political Economy* 42, no. 4 (2010): 223–46.
12. Tuckerman, *Elevation*, 7.
13. Robert W. Kelso, *The History of Public Poor Relief in Massachusetts, 1620–1920* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1922), 49.
14. Kelso, *The History of Public Poor Relief*, 118.
15. Kelso, *The History of Public Poor Relief*, 124.
16. Kelso, *The History of Public Poor Relief*, 118–19.
17. Kelso, *The History of Public Poor Relief*, 125.
18. Tuckerman, *Elevation*, 161.
19. Tuckerman, *Elevation*, 162.
20. Kelso, *The History of Public Poor Relief*, 136.
21. Tuckerman, *Elevation*, 103.
22. Tuckerman, *Elevation*, 104. To say that even the poor can afford ardent spirits would seem to acknowledge an advance in the standard of living of the poor beyond mere subsistence.
23. Tuckerman, *Elevation*, 168.
24. McColgan, *Joseph Tuckerman*, 248–55.
25. Tuckerman, *Principles*, 288.
26. McColgan, *Joseph Tuckerman*, 282.
27. Robert Hunter, "The Relation Between Social Settlements and Charity Organization," *Journal of Political Economy* 11, no. 1 (December 1902): 75–88.
28. Hunter, "The Relation Between Social Settlements and Charity Organization," 75.
29. Hunter, "The Relation Between Social Settlements and Charity Organization," 76.
30. Hunter, "The Relation Between Social Settlements and Charity Organization," 77.
31. Mark H. Leff, "Consensus for Reform: Mothers'-Pension Movement in the Progressive Era," *Social Service Review* 47, no. 3 (September 1973): 397.
32. James Leiby, "Charity Organization Reconsidered," *Social Service Review* 58, no. 4 (December 1984): 423.
33. Michael B. Katz, *Improving Poor People: The Welfare State, the "Underclass" and Urban Schools in History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 3.