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F. E. Mayer

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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The Rise of Liberal Theology in Congregationalism

The terms "Liberalism" and "Modernism" have been used interchangeably during the past few decades. Prior to 1910 the representatives of rationalistic theology in American Protestantism were known as "liberal theologians." The term "Modernism" was employed originally to denote the radical historico-critical method of two Roman Catholic scholars, Louis Duchesne and Alfred Loisy of the Paris University, who questioned virtually all of the ecclesiastical material on which the Papacy based its claim as well as the Biblical foundations. This movement was condemned by Pius X in 1907.¹⁾ It was quite natural that in the clash between the liberal and conservative theologians in the large Reformed bodies the "essentialists," or "Fundamentalists," applied the term "Modernists" to the liberal Protestant theologians. Since 1910 the term "Modernism" has practically lost its first connotation and is used to denote radical theology in the Reformed bodies. Adherents of Modernism, however, usually avoid using this term.²⁾ Shailer Mathews and G. B. Smith, editors of *A Dictionary of Religion and Ethics*, 1921, distinguish between Modernism (the Roman Catholic radical school) and Liberal Theology (freedom of discussion and the right of dissension from traditional theology). Even Machen, the outstanding Fundamentalist leader in the Fundamentalist-Modernistic Controversy, used the term "Liberalism" rather than "Modernism" in his famous polemical writing: *Christianity and Liberalism*. In current theological literature the term

1) In *Der Katholizismus, Sein Stirb und Werde*, Leipzig, 1937, a number of anonymous writers attempt to perpetuate the "Modernism" of these Catholic radicals.

2) An exception is Shailer Mathews' book: *The Faith of Modernism*, 1924. E. E. Aubrey also employs the term "Modernism" rather than "Liberalism" in his *Present Theological Tendencies*, 1931.

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"modernism" occurs rarely.³) In selecting the title for this essay, we were motivated by the consideration that the term "Modernism" is really not applicable to a system of theological doubting and denying, whose origin is described in Genesis 3.

I

There is a straight line from Plymouth Congregationalism to modern Liberalism. Though the Congregational churches are numerically the weakest of the well-known Reformed bodies, they have furnished a relatively very high number of the theologians who played a prominent role in the rise and spread of Liberalism. This is due on the one hand to the theological genius and on the other to the peculiar form of church government of Congregationalism.

While the feeder roots of Liberal Theology are planted in the soil of philosophic rationalism, sponsored by the philosophy of Leibnitz, Locke, Berkeley, and English Deism, and in the soil of the democratic spirit of the New England frontiersman seeking freedom from all authority, the taproot of Liberal Theology is planted in the soil of Calvinistic theology. New England Congregationalism was starkly Calvinistic. Both the approach to and the real essence of Calvinistic theology, however, brought forth the very spirit which moved the Congregational theologians first to "liberalize" and ultimately to abandon Calvinistic theology. The early Congregational divines believed with John Calvin that the sovereignty of God is the point of departure for all theological discussion. The theory of a bifurcated and unconditional election was thought to set forth most adequately the absolute independence, sovereignty, and majesty of God.⁴) This "horrible decree"—as Calvin calls it—was the occasion first to modify and ultimately

3) *Liberal Theology* is the title of the volume containing essays by such well-known liberals as J. C. Bennett, H. S. Coffin, Walter Horton, A. C. McGiffert, Jr., Henry P. Van Dusen, in honor of one of Modernism's outstanding representatives, Eugene W. Lyman, professor emeritus of Union Seminary.

4) Calvin: "Those whom He has created to a life of shame and a death of destruction, that they might be instruments of His wrath and examples of His severity, He causes to reach their appointed end." *Institutes*, III, XXIV, 12. Even such a mediating Calvinist as Samuel Hopkins, prominent among the New England theologians, when arguing that the chief virtue of man is disinterested, wholly unselfish love, says: "It is not for the glory of God that all should be saved, but most for His glory that a number should be damned; otherwise all would be saved. We will, therefore, now make a supposition, which is not an impossible one, viz., that it is most for God's glory and for the universal good that you should be damned; ought you not to be willing to be damned on this supposition that God could not be glorified by you in any other way?" Quoted by F. H. Foster, *Genetic History of New England Theology*, p. 157.

to reject Calvinism entirely. The School of New England Theologians, whose founder is Jonathan Edwards (1703—1758),⁵⁾ wanted to retain the underlying principle of Calvinism, but modified the entire system in such a way that human responsibility could be retained. This had become necessary because of the increasing influence of Arminianism during the revivals of 1734—40. Edwards and his successors, notably Joseph Bellamy, Samuel Hopkins, Jonathan Edwards, Jr., liberalized Calvinism, not in the direction of Scriptural theology, but toward a philosophical, liberal, and in part mystical theology. The New England Theology was an attempt to rationalize completely the Calvinistic faith. In this attempt these Congregational-Calvinistic theologians used philosophy to explain the imputation of Adam's guilt,⁶⁾ they sacrificed the doctrine of the vicarious atonement in the interest of the rectoral or governmental theory of the Atonement; having minimized the value of Christ's passive obedience, they viewed justification as man's union with Christ and thus sharing His active obedience. Ultimately, however, these attempts at modifying the Calvinistic system did not satisfy many Congregational theologians. On the contrary, the one-sided emphasis of God's sovereignty in Calvinism produced a strong reaction and led to a complete disavowal of Calvinism. Henry Ward Beecher, a strong protagonist of Liberal Theology, is a good case in point. He writes:

Even under that (my father's alleviated Calvinism) the iron entered my soul. I wanted to be a Christian, but I stood imprisoned behind those iron bars: "It is all decreed. If you are elected, you will be saved anyhow — if you are not elected, you will perish!"⁷⁾

But more important for the development of Liberal Theology is the formal principle of Calvinism, which is determined by its distinctive theology. Calvinism views the universe, both in the realm of nature and of the spirit, as a system of beautiful harmony and holds that God reveals Himself as well in nature, history, providence, as in the Bible. Since man in the fallen state no longer has a correct view of God, therefore the Bible serves as a corrective and becomes the standard for all human actions both

5) The best treatise on the New England Theology was written by F. H. Foster, a Congregationalist and radically liberal theologian. The most recent biography on Jonathan Edwards was written by Ola E. Winslow. Samples of Edwards' sermons, particularly the famous series on the Doctrine of Justification which occasioned the great revival in 1734, are found in collections of American sermons. Many people consider his treatise on Free Will, published in 1754, one of the keenest analyses in the field of philosophy.

6) The New School Federal Headship theory. Cf. C. T. M., XII, page 128.

7) Thompson, E. T., *Changing Emphases in American Preaching*, page 59.

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in the field of "common" and "special" grace. In other words, the Bible prescribes for all men the conduct not only in their relation to God, but also in all social, economic, and political relations, in the choice of a vocation, their studies, etc. The grand purpose of this is that *all* men live to the "greater glory" of God.⁸⁾ This principle is responsible for the rationalistic, literalistic, and legalistic spirit and particularly the enthusiastic spirit of Calvinism. This spirit manifested itself in the theological methodology of Congregational theologians and eventually crystallized in the empirical method of Liberal Theology, in the overemphasis of a this-worldly program as the Church's prime objective, in the denial of fundamental truths, if reason could not comprehend them.

The question, however, immediately suggests itself: Why did Congregationalism become the hotbed of Liberal Theology, whereas two other large bodies, the Presbyterians and the Particular Baptists, whose theology is just as Calvinistic, turned a deaf ear to the early attempts to "liberalize" theology? It is true, indeed, that theologically there is no difference between these three Reformed bodies.⁹⁾ But there is a basic difference in church polity. The Presbyterians maintain that the presbyterian form is *iure divino* and that the congregation must be governed by the session, i. e., the teaching elders functioning as God's representatives and the ruling elders serving as the congregation's.¹⁰⁾ Doctrinal discipline was not only possible, but virtually self-evident, as long as the Presbyterians remained loyal to their basic principle concerning church polity. The Congregationalists, like the Baptists, however, were strict Separatists, "come-outists," and rejected every form of ecclesiastical authority, the hierarchical autocracy of the Established Church in England, the presbyterian form which placed the government into the hands of the clergy and representatives of the congregation, the synodical, or the rule by a majority vote of congregations. The early Congregationalists held that the local congregation as an organized brotherhood of converted and proved believers (the elect) is dependent upon God and is therefore self-sufficient. Each congregation is autonomous in such a manner that the laity determines the doctrinal position for each congregation according to the light which they possess, and the same right must

8) Meeter, H. H., *Calvinism*, ch. II. Walther, W., *Lehrbuch der Symbolik*, p. 217; Klotsche, E. H., *Christian Symbolics*, p. 204 f. See the constitution of the newly organized Christian University Association of America, *Presbyterian Guardian*, July 25, 1944, p. 226.

9) The standards of the Presbyterians (Westminster Confession, 1644), of the Congregationalists (Savoy Declaration, 1680), and of the Baptists (New Hampshire Declaration, 1742) are virtually identical in *rebus et phrasibus*.

10) *Constitution of Presbyterian Church U. S. A.*, 1937, pp. 339 ff. *Manual of Presbyterian Law*, 1937, pp. 37 f., 278 ff.

be granted to every other congregation. The only tie which unites the independent Congregational Church is the "fellowship in common thinking and common aspirations."¹¹⁾ The Baptists go beyond the Congregationalists by ascribing to every individual soul the right and competence to interpret the will of Christ for itself.¹²⁾ While the Baptist principle of the sovereignty of the individual permits conservative Fundamentalists to fellowship rank Modernists in such Baptist affiliations as the Northern Baptist Convention and proscribes heresy trials as foreign to the Baptist genius, nevertheless it is this Baptist principle of the competence and sovereignty of the individual soul which has prompted Baptists individually to take their religion more seriously than other denominations, and they have, by and large, remained loyal to the essential truths of the Christian faith. This is true particularly in the Southern conventions of the Baptists. The Congregational principle, however, permitted congregations as such to adopt the errors which were brought into the churches by such controversies as the Half-Way Covenant, New England Theology, Unitarianism, Universalism, and ultimately Liberal Theology. Historic Congregationalism was not indifferent to heresies, but was totally impotent to deal with doctrinal aberrations, because each congregation was granted the prerogative *iure divino* to establish its own theological platform. Therefore:

Liberalism has been with them [the Congregational Churches] a matter of internal necessity. It has been their great good fortune to be free churches, free from ecclesiastical control and free in the association of like-minded men zealous for the truth and determined to know it ever more perfectly. They are historically innovators, from Scrooby to Plymouth, and from Boston to Providence. They have always been looking for more light, and they have been eager to follow it. The great, closely organized churches, like the Presbyterian and Episcopalian, cannot pass through a course of peaceful evolution of doctrine. Their only method is revolution. Hence the work of leadership has fallen upon these churches, whose

11) Fagley, L. F., *History of Congregationalism*, pp. 47, 48, 64; Sweet, W. W., *Religion in Colonial America*, ch. III; Walker, W., *Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, pp. 203 ff., *id.*, *Journal of Religion*, X, 204—218. Strictly speaking, there is no denomination under the name The Congregational Church. The official name of this body is now "Congregational and Christian Churches." *Census of Religious Bodies*, 1936.—Lutheran theology also makes much of the sovereignty of the local congregation. It differs from the Congregational ideal in refusing to condemn all other forms of church government and holds that the sovereignty and independency of the local congregation is of the *bene esse*, but not of the *esse* of the congregation.

12) A. H. Strong, *Christ in Creation*, p. 257. G. B. Foster: "The right of the individual to form his own creed is inalienable." *Finality of the Christian Religion*, XVIII. This principle was developed by Roger Williams; see James Ernst, *Roger Williams, the New England Firebrand*.

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natural American aggressiveness has been touched and hal-
lowed by a longing for a deeper experience of religion, and for
an ever increasing understanding of its fundamental prin-
ciples.¹³⁾

II

Horace Bushnell, 1802—1876, pastor of North Congregational Church at Hartford, Conn., is in many respects the father of American Liberalism. Bushnell was not a scientific theologian, and his interests were not in developing a system of theology. His books, though widely read at the time of their publication, are of little interest today.¹⁴⁾ Bushnell's significance lies in this, that he introduced Schleiermacher's theological method in American theology. He learned Schleiermacher's theology through the English philosopher-poet Samuel Coleridge in his "Aids to Reflection." Coleridge took the position of Schleiermacher that man's "frommes Gottesbewusstsein" is the source of religious truth. Following the Schleiermacher-Coleridge school of thought, Bushnell rejected the position that the Bible is propositional in content, that is, that all statements of the Bible have doctrinal meaning and must be accepted as such. Bushnell held that "Christian doctrine is formulated experience" and that moral insight, experience, intuition, man's feeling of dependence upon God, reason in its wider sense, lead to an understanding of spiritual realities. He accepted the Bible only in the light of his own religious experiences and rejected all dogmatical formulations. In a lecture entitled "Dissertation on Language"¹⁵⁾ he argued that language is inexact and in-

13) Foster, F.H., *The Modern Movement in American Theology*, pp. 14 and 15. Twelve of the fourteen pre-revolutionary Congregational churches of Boston became Unitarian without any perceptible change in charter, organization, platform, or worship. True, there were periods of a re-awakening of evangelical, resp. Calvinistic, consciousness, notably the founding of Andover Seminary in opposition to liberal Harvard University at the beginning of the nineteenth century. There is today a group of fundamental Congregational ministers and congregations who through the *Congregational Beacon* as "the voice of conservative Congregationalism contend for the faith of the fathers," i. e., the Calvinistic-Reformed faith. And the *Christian Century* reports that only recently a group of younger Congregational ministers have formed an organization called "Christus Victor," with the avowed purpose of challenging the Liberalism of the older theologians and of advocating neo-orthodoxy. July 12, 1944, p. 839.

14) Bushnell's significant writings are: *Christian Nurture*, 1847, edition of 1865; *Nature and the Supernatural*, 1858, edition of 1897; *The New Life*, collection of sermons, 1858, edition of 1862; *The Vicarious Sacrifice, Grounded in Principles of Universal Obligation*, 1866.—Secondary sources: Mary Bushnell Cheney, *The Life and Letters of H. Bushnell*; E. T. Thompson, *Changing Emphases in American Preaching*, ch. I; F. H. Foster, *A History of New England Theology*, ch. XIV; R. S. Franks, *A History of the Doctrine of the Work of Christ*, II, pp. 401 ff.

15) This lecture constituted the preface to the publication *God in Christ*. Since this volume was not accessible to us, we are using Thompson, *op. cit.*, as our guide.

adequate to present spiritual truth, in fact, language changes its meaning and therefore reflects varying and shifting points of view which must be modified or changed in the light of our religious experience. Scriptures must therefore be studied not "as a magazine of propositions and mere dialectic entities, but as inspirations and poetic forms of life which also require divine inbreathings and exaltations in us so that we may assent unto their meaning." Truth, then, is found by examining one's own religious views. As Foster says:

Bushnell emphasized the necessity for every thinker to re-create truth for himself by the originative process of the mind, the religious life as itself a source of theology, the importance of the religious nurture of children as the method of their religious development."¹⁶⁾

With the empirical method Bushnell approached the problem of the nature of man, the doctrine of the Trinity, the miracles, and especially the Vicarious Atonement. In his treatment of these theological questions he shows himself clearly as the father of the "new theology."

1. Bushnell's first important treatise was a volume on Christian education, *Christian Nurture*. In this work he severely criticizes the accepted theory of the day that a person could become a Christian only in an emotional revival meeting. He lays down some very fine principles on Christian education, especially on the responsibility of parents. However, the underlying principle of the entire treatise is that since the child is able to know God by his own religious experience, the Christian family must provide the opportunity for such experiences. He says:

The child is to grow up a Christian and never know himself as being otherwise. The effort of Christian nurture should be that the child is open to the world as one that is spiritually renewed, not remembering the time when he went through a technical experience (a cataclysmic religious upheaval), but seeming rather to have loved what is good from his earliest years.¹⁷⁾

Bushnell breaks with the doctrine of man's total depravity, so strenuously advocated by the early Calvinistic-Congregationalists. He writes:

16) Foster, *Modern Movement in American Theology*, p. 59. This is the empirical method, virtually identical with Ritschlian theology. Cf. *C. T. M.*, current volume, pp. 145 ff. It is difficult to prove whether Ritschl and Bushnell, who were contemporaries, influenced each other. The similarity in their theological method is due to the fact that both had adopted Schleiermacher's *principtum cognoscendi*.—Foster goes so far as to say that Bushnell, the oratorical preacher, had a more fertile mind than Ritschl, the analytical professor, and that it is a sad commentary on American thought that Ritschl and not Bushnell has received the plaudits of American theologians. Foster, *History of New England Theology*, p. 142.

17) *Op. cit.*, p. 10.

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Why should it be thought incredible that there should be some good principle awakened in the mind of a child? Take any scheme of depravity you please, there is yet nothing in it to forbid the possibility that a child should be led, in his first moral act, to cleave unto that which is good and right. The good in him goes into combat with the evil and holds a qualified sovereignty. As the Spirit of Jehovah fills all the worlds of matter, so all human souls, the infantile as well as the adult, have a nurture of the Spirit appropriate to their age and wants.¹⁸⁾

We could subscribe to this but for the fact that Bushnell finds the ability of the child to perform God-pleasing works not in baptismal regeneration, but in the child's native ability to discover the truth and perform the truth through its own religious development. The Christian home, parental example, the calm guidance of the Church, and the child's natural ability are for Bushnell the means of grace to lead the child into a full Christian life.¹⁹⁾

2. The denial of the doctrine of the Trinity was a second result of his false *principium cognoscendi*. Believing that truth is determined by experience, by feeling, and by imaginative reasoning—not by dialectics and metaphysics—he professed to accept only such a view of the Trinity as would serve practical Christianity and brought God into a lively, glowing, and manifold power over the inner man. Bushnell was a Sabellian modalist, occupying, as he thought, a mediating position in the bitter Unitarian controversy of his day. He wanted to retain a real condescension of God to our estate, but in so doing denied the *homoousia* of the Son. The Trinity was for him a trinity of manifestations. Like Ritschl, he denounced the Church's credal statements as metaphysical speculation and accepted the doctrine of the Trinity only in so far as we experience a threefold interrelation between God and man.²⁰⁾

3. Against the growing naturalism of the day, which identified God and nature and left no room for regeneration, Bushnell argued that naturalism must be refuted not by placing the natural and the supernatural into sharp antithesis, but rather by viewing them as coeternal factors in God's economy. He defines nature as that realm of being which has an acting from within itself and under its own laws.²¹⁾ The supernatural is God's action on the lines of cause and effect in this fallen world, thus repairing the damage which the laws of nature in their penal action would otherwise perpetuate. The supernatural, as a redemptive agency, operates with and upon the natural. It is therefore not necessary to look

18) *Op. cit.*, pp. 16 f.

19) *Op. cit.*, p. 46.

20) Foster and Thompson have been our guide here, since the book *God in Christ* was not available.

21) *Nature and the Supernatural*, 1897, p. 37.

for the suspension of the laws of nature to find the supernatural. In ourselves we discover a tier of existences that are above nature; in fact, the very idea of our personality is that of a being not under the law of cause and effect, a being supernatural.²²⁾ Breaking with Calvin's determinism completely, he finds that self-determination, the crown jewel of personality, makes man supernatural. He is *supra naturam*, e. g., instead of yielding to the temptations of his evil environment, he rises above the natural chain of cause and effect. Thus also God is supernatural not by setting the laws of nature aside, but rather by acting upon them in a wholesome and helpful way.²³⁾ Bushnell's school believed that this theory had relieved the tension between the scientist and the theologian. Yes, but by a denial of miracles, by equating the supernatural with the natural. Creation, Inspiration, Incarnation, Reconciliation, the miracles of Christ, cease to be miracles. They are only terms for God's agency as Rectifier, Redeemer, and Regenerator in the world of nature.²⁴⁾ Bushnell is a good example of how the liberal theologian uses Scriptural terminology to hide his liberal theology.

4. Bushnell is probably best known in our circles as the father of the Moral-Influence Theory of the Atonement. His views on the Atonement are the natural culmination of his entire theology and at the same time show most clearly his basic departure from Scriptural theology. The treatise in which he sets forth his views is entitled *The Vicarious Sacrifice*.²⁵⁾ He defines the Vicarious Sacrifice in terms which appear quite orthodox:

Christ engages at the expense of great suffering and even of death itself to bring us out of our sins themselves and so out of their penalties; being himself profoundly identified with us in our fallen estate and burdened in feeling with our evils.²⁶⁾

However, Bushnell very emphatically denies the imputation of man's sin to Christ, for "that kind of penal suffering would satisfy nothing but the worst injustice."²⁷⁾ He objected to the governmental theory of the Atonement developed by the earlier New England theologians primarily because that system, he said, is immoral, since the innocent is punished for the guilty. "Christ is not here to die, but dies because he is here." In other words, Christ did not come into this world to suffer the pain and penalty of others, but Christ came to heal men's bodies and souls, and in the course of this work it became His lot to die.²⁸⁾ The healing ministry, says Bushnell, best exemplifies the purpose of His com-

22) *Op. cit.*, pp. 42 f.

23) *Op. cit.*, pp. 56 ff., 494.

24) *Op. cit.*, p. 508.

25) We are following the edition of 1866, comprising 552 pages.

26) *Op. cit.*, p. 41.

27) *Op. cit.*, p. 46.

28) *Op. cit.*, p. 130.

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ing into the world, which was to extend immediately to the patient a divine or supernatural power. Sin and sickness are so closely related that it was only natural that the healing of men's physical ills would best illustrate that the real purpose of Christ's coming is the bringing of God's regenerative power into the lives of men.²⁹⁾

But how does Christ bring this power to men? It is to be noted here, too, that Bushnell was a Sabellian. He held:

Through the medium of three modes of personal action the ineffable One discloses Himself and comes near to the apprehension of His creatures. *The Logos is the self-revealing faculty of the Deity; Father, Son, and Spirit are the dramatis personae through which the hidden Being reveals Himself.*³⁰⁾

God, so the argument goes, can act upon man through a twofold power, the force principle and the moral power. Only the second power can work the regeneration of men. While present in the Old Testament, this moral power of God (i. e., the Second Person in a trinity of manifestations, or the "Christ") was not as clearly revealed as was the force principle, i. e., God's sovereignty, infinitude, abstractness, omnipotence, evident in His creative and providential operations. Howsoever perfect these attributes, they remain distant from our experience. In Christ, however, the moral power of God is revealed to men. Having brought his outward historic work of revealing the moral and regenerative power to a close, Christ withdrew His visible presence. The Spirit, an invisible, always present, everywhere pervading "Christ," has become the moral power of God for the world today. The "Christ" is more than an example, more than a revelation of God. In Him the entire moral power for man's regeneration is manifested and made operative.³¹⁾

Bushnell proceeds to show how "Christ," i. e., God's regenerating power, is effective in the lives of men. First of all, says Bushnell, God is humanized in Christ, for in Him we experience God as God-Man, born into our race, meeting us not as a theophany, but in such a manner that we can perceive Him as a friend who has not come to punish, but to pardon and to help us.³²⁾ Secondly, "Christ" as God's moral power awakens the sense of guilt, both by his fierce denunciation of sin and also by permitting the vileness of man to be heaped upon Him. When man sees that Christ willingly endured the consequences of sin, in His Passion became the object of the basest motives in both Jews and Romans, then man sees how dreadful his sins really are. This prompts him

29) *Op. cit.*, pp. 147 ff.

30) Fisher, *History of Christian Doctrine*, p. 439.

31) *Op. cit.*, pp. 79, 168—320, especially pp. 186—189.

32) *Op. cit.*, p. 220 f.

to repent, and at the same time Christ's moral power engenders confidence in Christ. Therefore, thirdly, Christ as the moral power makes evident that God suffers vicariously on account of sin, especially in Christ's death. This must prompt the sinner to believe that God is kind and forgiving. When the sinner realizes that God suffers for man, there is engendered a deep desire on the part of man to flee his sin. And when God sees that His moral power has broken man's stubbornness, the at-one-ment between God and man is established.³³⁾ This doctrine of the atonement with its anthropomorphic view of God is virtually identical with that of Schleiermacher and resembles in spots the view of Ritschl. As in Schleiermacher's system, so also in Bushnell's the substitutionary satisfaction becomes a satisfactory substitution. It is, of course, self-evident that Bushnell denies the forensic character of justification. He says, that when we are justified, we are "united to God in the antecedent glories of His eternal character." Faith "is trusting of one's self over to him, to be newly characterized by Him."³⁴⁾

Bushnell and Ritschl advocated the same basic theological principle, and in many points both were agreed in their theological propositions. But Bushnell the pastor made no attempt to systematize his theological views, while Ritschl the theological professor clearly set forth his basic principle and the necessary deductions and thus founded the Ritschlian School of Theology. Nevertheless Bushnell played an important part in the genesis of Liberal Theology, though Ritschl is frequently looked upon as the theologian who gave American Liberalism its direction. Bushnell's *principium cognoscendi* is very largely responsible for the rise and spread of Liberal Theology. He held that Christian doctrine is not a *corpus doctrinae* revealed in Scripture, but rather that theology is "formulated Christian experience," something which is vitally practical for the uses of the soul.³⁵⁾ And this *principium cognoscendi* became the leitmotif in the theology of Bushnell's successors in Congregationalism. Beecher, Abbott, Gladden, Gordon, and King took their direction from Bushnell. But more than this. An examination of Bushnell's writings shows that he not only introduced the theory that subjective experience is the source of doctrine, he actually became the theological father of at least four tenets which lie at the very center of Modernistic Theology. 1) In his *Nature and the Supernatural* Bushnell virtually identifies

33) *Op. cit.*, pp. 223 ff.

34) *Op. cit.*, pp. 428, 432.

35) Amos S. Chesebrough, *Bushnell Centenary*, p. 47, quoted in Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 44. The reader will observe that Bushnell's views coincide quite closely with those of Ritschl's theory of "moral-value judgment."

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God and nature. This is but the beginning of the later theory of Divine Immanence, which in Empirical Theism reduces God to a mere "personality-evolving process in society."³⁶⁾ 2) In his *Christian Nurture* he defined conversion not as a change in man wrought by divine power, but as a psychologically normal process and a gradual progress. This theory prepared the way for Congregational theologians within a decade of Bushnell's death to accept the Darwinian theory of evolution. 3) Bushnell probably did more than any other single theologian to defend the liberal and radical theory that man is inherently good. It is but a step from Bushnell to the confirmed Liberal who sees in man a potential god. 4) In his *Vicarious Sacrifice* he makes Jesus as human as we are and places His vicarious sacrifice on the level of a mother's sacrifice for her child. True, Bushnell said, that Christ differed from us not in degree, but in kind; nevertheless his denial of the Trinity and the Vicarious Atonement paved the way for the Liberals' view concerning Christ's person and work. Thus by 1870 Congregationalism's outstanding preacher and writer had thoroughly prepared the soil in his denomination for Liberal Theology. While the so-called School of Bushnell, represented chiefly by Theo. T. Munger and James M. Whiton, ultimately adopted Unitarianism, the majority of Congregational leaders remained in the denomination and, following Bushnell's liberal tendencies, cast about for support and undergirding of the liberal views which they had learned from Bushnell. And these were not difficult to find.

III

We shall discuss five influences which became dominant factors in the development of Liberal Theology. The first was the evolutionary hypothesis. With the nineteenth century came the ascendancy of science, which deeply affected many men's views concerning man's origin and destiny. Science, so called, attacked revealed religion in general, and the Calvinistic theory of the sovereignty of God with the implication that all events are the result of God's arbitrary will in particular. The claim was made that events occur as man conforms to or transgresses the demonstrable laws of nature. Man's origin as well as his future destiny depend on the extent to which mankind co-operates with these laws of nature. The God of Scriptures was supplanted by "natural processes." But the various age-old theories of evolution did not satisfy the scientist in view of the new scientific data brought to light with modern instruments. He therefore received with enthusiasm Darwin's theory of natural selection as the basic law in the develop-

³⁶⁾ Wieman and Meland, *American Philosophies of Religion*, pp. 286 ff.

ment of the universe (*Origin of Species*, 1859) and of man (*Descent of Man*, 1871).³⁷⁾ Not only the scientist but the liberal theologians as well hailed Darwin's theory with delight. After a few unimportant skirmishes between conservative and radical theologians, Dr. Chas. Hodge in 1874 attacked Darwinianism on the ground that it denies teleology and is therefore atheistic. But in the same year John Fiske defended the theory that man evolved from some lower species.³⁸⁾ He held that the animal's cerebrum can be enlarged only during a relatively long period, covering infancy, puberty, and adolescence. As long as animals were independent of their mother at birth or at least shortly thereafter, the offspring would remain on the same level as the parent. When by a process of evolution the time span between birth and full development was extended to twenty years, man emerged from the animal state. Newman Smyth of Andover (a biologist and theologian) in *The Place of Death in Evolution* (1897), Lyman Abbott in *Theology of an Evolutionist* (1897),³⁹⁾ Washington Gladden in *How Much Is Left of the Old Doctrines* (1899), and many less known theologians in Congregationalism accepted the hypothesis of evolution.⁴⁰⁾

The acceptance of the evolutionary theory by the liberal theologians in Congregationalism proved disastrous and fatal. These "scientifico-theological" philosophers sought God in the laws of nature and found—an infra-personal God; they were on a quest for truth and found—only relativities.⁴¹⁾ The Divine Immanence theory of Liberal Theology is a natural consequence of the evolutionary hypothesis.⁴²⁾ Probably the most important result for Liberal Theology was the fact that the evolution theory prompted these theologians to view society as a unit. This view helped to develop the principles of the social gospel. Whiton, a Congregationalist, stated that man is not "a creature of the scene and temporal," but he is "in a grand community of duties and privileges."⁴³⁾

Higher Criticism was the second prop on which these young Liberals in the Congregational churches leaned. Many of them

37) Henry K. Rowe, *The History of Religion in the United States*, pp. 132 f. A. C. Knudson, *Present Theological Tendencies*, pp. 30—45.

38) John Fiske, *The Destiny of Man*, pp. 42, 51, 96, 107.

39) Synopsis of this treatise in H. S. Coffin, *Religion Yesterday and Today*, p. 22.

40) Foster, F. H., *The Modern Movement*, ch. III; G. B. Smith, *Religious Thought in the Last Quarter Century*, p. 97.

41) John Horsch, *Modern Religious Liberalism*, pp. 235 f.

42) Fiske, *op. cit.*, pp. 117—118. Ph. Brooks somewhere said: "Man is a child of God on whom the devil has laid his hand, and not a child of the devil, whom God is trying to steal."

43) S. Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel*, pp. 126 ff.

had studied in Germany.⁴⁴⁾ Not only did they accept the theories of Wellhausen, Strauss, Baur, but they adopted the so-called inductive method of Bible study, advocated in America especially by Charles Briggs. They believed that the theologian must recapture the culture of each book of the Bible, examine the religious experiences recorded, and evaluate them in the light of present religious experiences. Dr. Lyman Abbott, Henry Ward Beecher's⁴⁵⁾ successor at the well-known Plymouth Congregational Church in Brooklyn and editor of the radical *Outlook*, became the leader of the Congregationalist Liberals. In *The Evolution of Christianity* (1892) he denied the historic faith of Christianity. He is particularly vicious in his attacks on the Bible, which he regards as the product of an evolutionary spiritual process, the record of the religious experiences of good men who progressively emerged from pagan concepts to "Christian" views.⁴⁶⁾

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century the leading theological professors of Germany (Harnack, Frank, Herrmann, Kaftan, to mention only a few), following the pattern of Schleiermacher and Ritschl, clothed their theology in the thought patterns of German Idealism. During these years a relatively large number of American Congregational students of theology did their post-graduate work in German universities, where they imbibed Neo-Kantian philosophy. Thus Idealism became the third prominent factor in the development of Modernism. Idealism removes the sharp contrast between the divine and the human, the natural and the supernatural, and paves the way for the Divine Immanence theory. Furthermore, Idealism believes that a supernatural revelation is not necessary, for man in his natural condition is capable of serving as a channel for a divine message. There is therefore no *a priori* truth, no inerrantly recorded revelation.⁴⁷⁾ Since religious concepts are said to grow in experience, the last expression of a truth is the best, and we find the final truth not in the Old, not even in the New Testament, but in the experiences of the

44) Foster, *op. cit.*, ch. VII: "Influences from Abroad."

45) For a study of Beecher's Liberal Theology we refer the reader to Foster, *op. cit.*, ch. V, Thompson, *op. cit.*, ch. II.

46) Abbott in *The Atonement in Modern Religious Thought*, a Symposium, p. 94. See Foster, *op. cit.*, for quotations from Abbott's writings.

47) Kant: Categories have value only in my experience. In my experience I need God, ethics, immortality. In short, all objects must adapt themselves to my mind, because they exist in the mind.—Hegel's famous thesis-antithesis-synthesis formula is another form of Idealism. He advocated the theory that all ideas, including religious ideas, grow in conflict. Pure reason says: God is abstract, i. e., the Father; practical reason says the opposite: God is finite, i. e., the Son; comprehensive reason says: God is both, abstract and manifest in man, i. e., the Holy Spirit. Professor Richard's book *Creative Controversies* is a good sample of this type of theology.

modern individual, thus Schleiermacher, or in the Christian Church, respectively the Lutheran congregation, thus Frank of Erlangen.⁴⁸⁾ It will not be necessary to demonstrate how this third factor has influenced modern Liberalism.⁴⁹⁾

Pragmatism was a fourth baneful influence on the development of Liberalism. The mind of the young liberal theologians had been prepared for the reception of pragmatism in theology by the writings of William James. Coming under the spell of the Ritschlian School with its "moral-values judgment" theory, they believed that only those things were true which furthered religious ideals. Henry Ward Beecher, Lyman Abbott, Washington Gladden, three famous Congregational preachers; Henry C. King, president of (Congregational) Oberlin College; the Presbyterians William Adams Brown and A. C. McGiffert of Union Theological Seminary, may be considered as the leading exponents of Ritschlian theology in America and responsible for the introduction of two chief Ritschlian principles, the pragmatic approach to theology and the social approach to the Gospel. King, who systematized the new theology, believed as did Ritschl, that the purpose of a thing determines its essence. Since the purpose of Christ's coming was identical with God's purpose, therefore Christ and God are one. All religious experiences must likewise be put to the acid test of their pragmatic value. Furthermore, King held that the essence of religion consists in respect for human personality. All men are inherently good, and this posit must prompt us not only to recognize the human race as a unit, but also to help every individual to develop his inherent possibilities toward a strong personality. In fact, God revealed Himself as a personality in order to convert us into real personalities.⁵⁰⁾ Ritschl's emphasis on Christ's kingdom as a social this-worldly kingdom and the keen interest in the new social studies paved the way for the introduction of the social gospel. Washington Gladden expressed the radical view that the purpose of Christianity is "a perfect man in a perfect society" and that to this end all institutions must be "christianized."⁵¹⁾ Ritschlianism was a potent factor in destroying faith in the absolute finality

48) See his *Die Theologie der Konkordienformel*.

49) See John Horsch, *Modern Religious Liberalism*, pp. 9—65. G. B. Foster's *The Finality of the Christian Religion* clearly sets forth the Liberal's theology which is predicated on the idealistic philosophy. See especially pp. 84 ff.

50) King, H. C., *Reconstruction in Theology and Theology and Social Consciousness*. See synopsis of these books in Foster, *op. cit.*, ch. X.

51) *Tools and the Man*, ch. I. In the interest of this philosophy Sheldon wrote his two well-known novels: *What Would Jesus Do?* and *In His Steps*.

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of God's Word and in substituting for the Gospel of reconciliation the impractical and hopeless social gospel.⁵²⁾

One more factor in the development of Liberal Theology must be mentioned, the Historico-Religious School, whose chief European representative was Ernst Troeltsch.⁵³⁾ The major premise of this school is as follows: Absolute and irrevocable laws are responsible for the evolution of the physical and biological world. Likewise the religious evolution of man must follow inexorably certain basic psychological laws.⁵⁴⁾ The theologian must therefore examine the religious experiences of individuals, cults, nations, and races, and on the basis of these data establish the laws of sequence by applying the generally accepted principles of psychology. By examining the scope of religious customs and social behavior in primitive society, the psychology of religions attempted to fix the laws of psychology which govern the nature of religion. The theory was established that all religious experiences in all parts of the world are essentially the same and follow the same basic psychological pattern. The great world religions differ only in so far as geographic and climatic conditions stimulate man's desire to worship along different lines, some worshiping nature, others their ancestors, etc. But in the final analysis religion is nothing more than man's normal psychological reaction to the mysterious, the numinous, the extraordinary. The basic elements of Christian worship are found in the pagan religions, in the mystery cults, and in Judaism. Arthur Drews in *Die Christus-Mythe* (1910) denies the existence of Jesus entirely in order to establish his premise that Christianity is not distinct from all other religions. Troeltsch and others treated the historical existence of Jesus as of secondary importance. The historical Jesus is of value to them only in so far as he serves as a rallying point for the Western concept of worship. Paul could have served as well, and it is merely accidental that we have Christianity instead of Paulianity. All religious concepts are no more than symbols. As the flags of the nations, though differing in color and size, represent the idea of patriotism, so

52) See article on social gospel in July, 1944, issue of the *C.T.M.*

53) A splendid synopsis of the theology of scientific religious history is to be found in H. R. Mackintosh, *Types of Modern Theology*, ch. VI.

54) At the turn of the century the liberal theologians were greatly interested in the "new theological science," the psychology of religion. A tremendous literary output made this a very popular course in the liberal seminaries. Wm. James, Rufus Jones, Wm. Hocking, J. H. Leuba, James Pratt, Rudolf Otto, Baron von Huegel, and many others wrote about varieties of religious experiences, experiences in mystical religion, God in human experience, the religious consciousness. Edward L. Schaub offers a good overview of this phase in the development of theology in *Theology During the Last Quarter Century*, pp. 116-139. See also Knudson, *op. cit.*, pp. 220-250.

also the various terms which describe the creative force in the universe, e. g., God, Father, King, Lord, the Great Architect, Shinto, Jesus, are merely, as the conceptual theist Shailer Mathews puts it, symbols, "instrumental concepts" of the "personality-evolving process."⁵⁵⁾

By 1900 the Congregational theologians had succumbed to the various radical influences and were ready to completely "liberalize" their theology.⁵⁶⁾ As a result of the undogmatic character of Congregationalism the former evangelical spirit of this church body was sacrificed in the interest of an entirely Liberal Theology.⁵⁷⁾

IV

According to the Congregational principle: "Fellowship in common thinking and common aspirations," these modern Liberals were united not by a set of theological propositions, but only by their common approach to theology. The Modernist's approach to theology has been analyzed by Aubrey as being historical and constructive. Accordingly the Modernist first attempts to recapture the religious experiences out of which the classic doctrines of Christianity arose. Doctrines are studied only in so far as they might have functional value for modern human life. Therefore the Modernist secondly seeks to find the social patterns of modern life which are equivalent to former social patterns. While the Cross meant the reconciliation between God and man in Paul's time, today it signifies man's adjustment under difficulties in the cosmic environment.⁵⁸⁾ The Modernist claims that his approach to theology has made him very tolerant of other men's views; that he is willing to check his findings; that he is interested only in method, not so much in finding absolute solutions. In reality, however, the Modernist has shown himself very intolerant of any views which are opposed to his method. Yes, he is tolerant, but only within the sphere of his theological investigation, a sphere which

55) Gaius G. Atkins, *The Procession of the Gods*, and Edward S. Ames, *Biography of the Gods*, are written from this viewpoint. The entire theory is so akin to Humanism that one can hardly consider advocates of this school as theists. The school is so radical that it has largely lost its influence. But the fact remains that the idea of an evolution of religion is still quite current, though some excellent studies, particularly those of G. Schmidt, have shown that the position which these men had occupied is impossible. S. Zwemer, *The Origin of Religion*, is a popular refutation of the principle of this school.

56) The modernistic spirit was, of course, evident at this time also in other denominations, e. g., William N. Clarke and Walter Rauschenbusch in the Baptist Church, Charles Briggs in the Presbyterian Church.

57) W. Walker, "Changes in Theology Among American Congregationalists," *Journal of Religion*, X, pp. 204—218.

58) Aubrey, E. E., *op. cit.*, pp. 25 ff.

has been arbitrarily but definitely circumscribed by subjective prejudice.

And yet the Modernist has a creed. True, it is chiefly negative, consisting in denials of Christian truths; nevertheless it is a creed. It may be summarized as follows: 1) The Bible a human record of religious experiences; 2) the Divine Immanence; 3) evolution in religious, moral, and social institutions; 4) the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man; 5) the Christ of experience, not the Christ of history; 6) the moral-influence theory of the Atonement; 7) the social gospel; 8) the Kingdom of God a this-worldly kingdom. Where these principles have been accepted, Christianity has been eliminated.⁵⁹⁾

Thus Congregationalism has exerted an influence in American theology out of proportion to its numerical strength. It has furnished a relatively larger number of significant theologians than any other denomination. The reason for this is, no doubt, that from Robert Browne (ca. 1580), John Robinson (ca. 1600), William Brewster (1620) down to Lyman Abbott Congregationalists have been "seekers." Instead of being bound by creeds the Congregational churches believe "that their contribution to Christianity is that they meet today's needs in today's way by today's unfettered judgment."⁶⁰⁾ Congregationalism encourages a spirit of adventure, grants utmost liberty to its followers, and thereby attracts and encourages such scholars as glory in their wisdom. The great contribution of the Lutheran theologian is that, keeping his reason captive in obedience to God's Word, he proclaims nothing but "the faith once delivered to the saints." Jude 3. F. E. MAYER

Increasing Lay Interest in Christian Literature

Ink in the Service of the Church

If you were to make a trip to the historic Wartburg, where Luther translated the New Testament into German, the guide would draw your attention to an inkspot on the wall. This inkspot, you would be told, was made when Luther hurled his inkwell at the devil.

There is a legend that ever since that time, more than 400 years ago, the devil has been afraid of ink. And well he might be, for it was the ink of the printer which in the days of the Reformation and throughout succeeding years proclaimed the day of doom for Satan's empire and the day of grace for all mankind.

59) In 1913 the National Council of Congregational Churches issued a statement of faith, which while employing Scriptural terminology is so vague that it is virtually meaningless. Fagley, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-68.

60) *Christian Century*, July 6, 1938, p. 841.