

The German Roots of Nineteenth-Century American Theology

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The basic thesis of Annette Aubert's impressive monograph is that the changes and developments within 19th-century American Reformed theology needs to be analysed within a transatlantic intellectual and theological context, especially in relation to the influence of German theology upon the United States. Dr Aubert argues that American Reformed theologians interacted with the liberal theology of F. D. E. Schleiermacher, the confessional orthodoxy of E. W. Hengstenberg, as well as the diverse school of German mediating theologians. The latter group are considered to be especially important as they tried to integrate traditional beliefs with the ideas of Schleiermacher and the philosopher G. W. F. Hegel. Understanding these influences is deemed crucial to our comprehension of how the American Reformed divines contextualised their own theology in light of the modern age.

Dr Aubert claims that no detailed study of the mediating theology's influence on American Reformed theology has been carried out thus far, nor has the issue of the divergence in theological method between the Princeton Theology and the Mercersburg Theology been adequately addressed. The book's primary contribution is its analysis of the engagement of Charles Hodge of Princeton and E. V. Gerhart of Mercersburg with German theology and European intellectual developments. Gerhart, in particular, remains an under-analysed figure. This neglect is probably as a result of the prominence of other Mercersburg theologians, especially John Williamson Nevin and the church historian Phillip Schaff.⁽¹⁾ Gerhart has been chosen owing to the fact that he produced a systematic theology of Mercersburg doctrine in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, something that Nevin failed to do.⁽²⁾ Hence the book fills a significant gap in our understanding of vital issues in American intellectual and religious history.

The distinguished historian of religion, David Bebbington, has drawn attention to the divergence between those 19th-century Christians who were influenced by Romanticism and those whose intellectual outlook continued to be shaped by the Enlightenment.⁽³⁾ One of the most significant examples of this cleavage is discussed in chapter one, as Dr Aubert analyses the diverse intellectual frameworks within which the Princeton and Mercersburg theologies operated. The theological method of the Princeton divines was deeply indebted to Scottish Common Sense Realism and Baconian theories of induction. According to their outlook exegetical theology must always take precedence over philosophical theology. Hence in an address to the students at Princeton Seminary, Ashbel Green insisted that Baconianism should be applied to biblical exegesis: 'in true philosophy we are to abandon all hypotheses, and simply to take facts as we find them ... so that no passage should be interpreted by any previous philosophical dogma, but simply and solely by a sound exegesis of language'.⁽⁴⁾ While Princeton did not slavishly follow Thomas Reid and other Scottish philosophers, they imitated Francis Turretin (a leading seventeenth-century Calvinist) in utilising philosophy as a hand-maid to theology and were thus able to employ Common Sense Realism and Baconianism as tools in defending Reformed orthodoxy and rejecting Romanticism and German Idealism.⁽⁵⁾

By way of contrast the Mercersburg theologians, Nevin and Gerhart, relied heavily upon German Idealism and Romanticism in their efforts to reformulate traditional Reformed prolegomena. Gerhart, for example, thought that Baconianism could be applied to the natural sciences, but not to the study of Christianity. Their rejection of Baconianism and Common Sense Realism led them away from the exegetical approach of Princeton's theological method to the Christological approach, which argued that Christ (rather than scripture) was the ultimate source of theology. Moreover, Schaff's application of Hegel's dialectic to church history and Nevin's appropriation of the ideas of the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge were further indicators of the influence of Romanticism. It should not be assumed, however, that Mercersburg had a monopoly in relation to its interaction with German theology. Both the *Mercersburg Review* and the *Princeton Review* took great interest in German Protestantism. Even Hodge appreciated aspects of German theological works, especially philological, critical, and exegetical studies which could be used to support Reformed orthodoxy. Hodge, in fact, had studied in Germany and interacted carefully with various strands of German theology.⁽⁶⁾ Thus, the author has provided a balanced assessment of the interaction between the Princeton divines and German theology, helpfully correcting the assertion that Hodge was 'anti-German'.⁽⁷⁾

Freidrich Schleiermacher, one of the main intellectual sources for German theology in this period, is given specific attention in chapter two. Even his ideological foes such as Charles Hodge recognised that the philosophy of Schleiermacher had a profound influence on the transatlantic theological world.⁽⁸⁾ This influence was felt both directly as a result of the reading of Schleiermacher's own writings and indirectly through Coleridge and the mediating theologians. Aside from idiosyncratic divines such as Nevin and Gerhart, more mainstream theologians including Moses Stuart and W. G. T. Shedd engaged with and appreciated aspects of Schleiermacher's work.⁽⁹⁾ This proviso notwithstanding, the author's judgment that Schleiermacher was the father of theological liberalism appears sound. Schleiermacher's theological method was inspired by a desire to reinterpret traditional doctrinal themes to suit the modern world, with him acting as a mediator between traditional religion and enlightened society. Consequently, Schleiermacher downgraded scholastic theology and marginalised the Protestant confessions as documents merely suited to their context. Schleiermacher, moreover, is recognised as the originator of the notion that all theology should

be deduced from a central principle. Modern theological movements which operate on such an assumption should therefore be regarded as appropriators of Schleiermacher's ideas, even if such ideas are used for more ostensibly orthodox purposes. Schleiermacher was also the inspiration behind theories which tended to emphasise Christ's incarnation at the expense of the atonement. Schleiermacher judged that Christ's redemptive act was not to be found at the end of his life, but at the beginning. This notion along with his rejection of penal substitution meant that Schleiermacher fundamentally departed from the views of Christ's work articulated at the Reformation and in later post-Reformation Protestant orthodoxy.

While the mediating theologians, whose influence is considered in chapter three, endeavoured to be faithful to church traditions, they, like Schleiermacher, also made theological alterations in light of modern thought. Mediating theologians were also influenced by 18th-century Pietism's notion that Christianity was not primarily about doctrine, but about practical life. As with Schleiermacher, they emphasised a Christological method and the idea of a central dogma in order to overcome the rigid dogmatic systems of the post-Reformation era. Mediating theologians such as August Tholuck and C. C. Ullmann also tended to diverge somewhat from the Reformers emphasis on the work of Christ. Not all, however, went as far as Schleiermacher in considering the atonement as fulfilled in the incarnation. I. A. Dorner, who was often praised in the *Princeton Review*, believed that Schleiermacher's view effectively obscured the ethical meaning of Christ's redemptive work. Despite their general acceptance of Christology as the controlling doctrine and their consequent rejection of *sola scriptura*, Dr Aubert very properly recognises that the mediating theologians were not an entirely unified school of thought. To this end, a useful taxonomy of the different categories among the mediating theologians (ecclesiastical, revivalist, and speculative) has been provided (p. 73).

The last four chapters of the book expand on themes mentioned in the introduction and conclusion by means of a detailed analysis of the interaction of Gerhart and Hodge with German theology and the relevance of this to their respective views of the atonement. Dr Aubert's work on Gerhart expands upon earlier work carried out by the renowned historian of theology, Richard Muller.⁽¹⁰⁾ In the author's opinion Gerhart's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* sought to complete what Nevin began and represent the first comprehensive systematic theology aligned with the mediating theology ostensibly written for American Reformed theologians. Gerhart was not, however, an uncritical follower of German theology. He did not go as far as Schleiermacher in rejecting the idea that the atonement satisfied God's justice. And while he maintained the Mercersburg position that humanity is redeemed by Christ's person and not by his work, Gerhart tended to put more emphasis upon the atonement than Nevin. Unlike Kant, Schleiermacher, and Hegel, Gerhart saw the need for objective theology in order to combat revivalism. It thus seems fair to conclude that Gerhart was a nuanced thinker as opposed to a slavish follower of German philosophy or theology. Nonetheless the influence of the Christological method upon Gerhart's theology is well drawn out by the author. Evidence of this is seen in the sharp dichotomy he made between Christian dogmatics and Biblical Theology, which he set in contrast to the 'metaphysical doctrine of premundane decrees' associated with Reformed orthodoxy.⁽¹¹⁾ This point raises the question of whether or not Mercersburg Theology deserves to be considered as constituting a significant modification of Reformed divinity. In view of the evidence which the author presents, especially with respect to Gerhart's rejection of various doctrines usually considered essential to Calvinism (such as total depravity and limited atonement), the review must answer in the affirmative.

With respect to Hodge, Dr Aubert argues that it is a mistake to view him as a mediating theologian. She challenges John Stewart's assertion that Hodge significantly differed from the Reformed scholastics partly owing to the influence of Tholuck's mediating theology.⁽¹²⁾ Such analysis appears flawed because although Hodge's interaction with the mediating theologians served to sharpen his theological method, he did not share Tholuck's mediating approach and his work displays much affinity with earlier expressions of Reformed orthodoxy. Furthermore, Hodge rejected several of the leading emphases of mediating theology. It is clear that he eschewed the notion of a central dogma and strongly opposed any downgrade of the atonement from being central to the gospel. Hodge's commitment to exegetical theology and his application of the inductive method to systematic theology was hardly congruous with the mediating theology's

deviations from *sola scriptura*. In fact, Hodge himself viewed the mediating theology (or, at least aspects of it) as ‘Christian only in name’.(13) And his uncompromising rejection of the Mercersburg Theology should make us very wary of viewing Hodge as a mediating theologian.(14)

There is much to commend this painstakingly researched and carefully written monograph. Dr Aubert’s conclusions are well-argued and largely convincing. The book does an excellent job of setting the divergence between Princeton and Mercersburg within a wider, transatlantic context. The nuanced analysis of Charles Hodge is especially welcome and reflects the author’s sound comprehension of the theological issues under review. The reviewer would, perhaps, question the validity of the author’s conclusion that Hodge anticipated the Biblical Theology of Geerhardus Vos (p. 312n). In his inaugural address at Princeton, Vos admitted that, ‘From the end of the preceding century, when our science first appears as distinct from Dogmatic Theology, until now, she has stood under the spell of un-Biblical principles. Her very birth took place under an evil star’.(15) It is interesting to speculate whether Hodge would have approved of Vos’s modification of Biblical Theology. Although repetition within a monograph can be helpful, especially for the sake of those who may only read particular chapters, the reviewer must express some displeasure at the amount of repetition within this volume. It is also debatable if there really needed to be two chapters each on Gerhart and Hodge. Once again, we are disappointed by the editorial decision to employ endnotes instead of footnotes. Aside from these minor points, *The German Roots of Nineteenth-Century American Theology* is an excellent study which displays both an in-depth knowledge of theology and the religious history of the transatlantic world. It should be eagerly read by all modern religious historians with an interest in the development of Reformed theology in the United States.

Notes

1. M. A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York, NY, 2002), pp. 409–12; D. G. Hart, *John Williamson Nevin: High Church Calvinist* (Phillipsburg, NJ, 2005), p. 103. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. E. V. Gerhart, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (New York, NY, 1891).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. D. W. Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody* (Leicester, 2005), pp. 109–72; David Bebbington, *Victorian Religious Revivals: Culture and Piety in Local and Global Contexts* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 48, 179, 191, 223, 270–1.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Ashbel Green, ‘Address delivered to the theological students of the Princeton Seminary, N. J., at the close of semi-annual examination in May, 1835’, *Biblical Repertory*, 7, 4 (Oct. 1835), 543–4.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. G. M. Giger, ed. J. T. Dennison (1679; 3 vols, Phillipsburgh, NJ, 1992), i, p. 20.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. W. A. Hoffecker, *Charles Hodge: The Pride of Princeton* (Phillipsburgh, NJ, 2011), pp. 77–118.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. This claim was made in an editorial comment in *Coleridge’s American Disciples: The Selected Correspondence of James Marsh*, ed. J. J. Duffy (Amherst, MA, 1973), p. 118n.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols., New York, NY, 1872–4) ii, p. 440.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. It should be remembered that Shedd, though committed to the orthodoxy of the Westminster Confession, was also a great admirer of Coleridge and edited his works. See Bebbington, *Dominance of Evangelicalism*, p. 143; W. G. T. Shedd, *Calvinism: Pure and Mixed – A Defence of the Westminster Standards* (New York, NY, 1893), p. vi.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. R. A. Muller, ‘Emanuel V. Gerhart on the “Christ-Idea” as fundamental principle’, *Westminster Theological Journal*, 48 (1986), 97–117.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Gerhart, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, pp. xiii–xiv.[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. J. W. Stewart, *Mediating the Center: Charles Hodge on American Science, Language, Literature, and Politics* (Princeton, NJ, 1995), pp. 13–14.[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. [Charles Hodge], ‘What is Christianity?’, *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, 32, 1 (Jan. 1860), 157.[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. For his critique of Nevin and Schaff, see P. C. Gutjahr, *Charles Hodge: Guardian of American Orthodoxy*

- (New York, NY, 2011), pp. 240–4; Hoffecker, *Charles Hodge*, pp. 255–67.[Back to \(14\)](#)
15. Geerhardus Vos, *Inauguration of the Rev. Geerhardus Vos PhD., D.D., as Professor of Biblical Theology* (New York, NY, 1894), p. 24.[Back to \(15\)](#)
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