A ‘VAST PRACTICAL EMBARRASSMENT’:  
JOHN W. NEVIN, THE MERCERSBURG THEOLOGY, AND THE CHURCH QUESTION

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QUESTION

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ABSTRACT

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John W. Nevin was the driving force behind the Mercersburg Theology, which Sydney Ahlstrom’s *A Religious History of the American People* notably described as “the outstanding example of the Catholic tendency in American Protestantism.” The Mercersburg Theology took its name from the Pennsylvania village where Nevin taught at the seminary of the German Reformed Church from 1840 to 1851. This dissertation examines the Mercersburg Theology as Nevin’s attempt to address what he perceived to be a crisis of epochal proportions.

Throughout Nevin’s Mercersburg writings one finds references to the “church question” as the all-encompassing problem of the day. For Nevin, the church question was not merely an attempt to assess the rival doctrinal claims of competing denominations. Rather, he urged his contemporaries to consider that the conditions for the possibility of fully Christian existence simply did not exist within the strictures of mainstream American Christianity. In short, the critical thrust of the Mercersburg Theology was to convict antebellum American Protestantism that it suffered from a lack
of catholicity. In the early 1850s, after nearly a decade of prolific, creative, and controversial scholarship, Nevin resigned his professional posts, giving rise to rumors that he would soon become a Roman Catholic. In the end, he did not convert, but Nevin—and the Mercersburg Theology itself, with its grand hopes for an “Evangelical Catholic” church of the future—had clearly reached an impasse.

In this contextual, diachronic reading of Nevin’s classic Mercersburg writings, I argue that the Mercersburg Theology is most instructive for contemporary reflection on the ongoing “Catholic tendency” in American Protestantism more generally precisely at the point at which Nevin tried—and failed—to resolve the church question to his own satisfaction. I contend that there is a correlation between Nevin's inability to bring the church question to a resolution and his equally inconclusive consideration, during these same years, of the classic scholastic inquiry into the motive for the Incarnation. This is a crucial link, since Nevin insisted upon a determinant relationship between the church question and the “Christ question” (i.e., Christology). Since he refrained from settling the question of whether God would have entered human history had humanity never sinned, Nevin seems to have acknowledged that insufficiently disciplined speculation threatens to reduce the ultimate mystery at the heart of Christian faith. In the same way, his failure to resolve the church question suggests that Nevin ultimately believed that to provide a clear and distinct account of “historical development” (or its absence), upon which the Reformation, and the far-reaching effects variously attributed to it, can be justified as necessary (or, conversely, categorically dismissed) remove the Incarnation from what he insisted was its rightful place as the cardinal “fact” of human history.

The unfinished character of Nevin’s quest serves as a kind of parable for the
Catholic tendency in American Protestantism, which indicates why the church question continues to be raised, and suggests why its resolution continues to remain elusive.
To Jennifer, Jonathan, and Micah

With Love
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In the course of this project I have become acquainted with the growing community of scholars dedicated to historical and theological study of the Mercersburg Theology. My debt to the literature produced by such scholars, both past and present, is substantial. It quickly became apparent that I brought questions and concerns to this project that differed from most of this scholarship. This is partly because I am a Baptist by heritage whose relationship to the Reformed theological tradition is rather indirect. It is also due to the fact that I have written about Nevin as a Baptist who has been studying alongside Catholic theologians that have become dear friends and mentors. For good or ill—and I trust, in hope, that it is ultimately for the good—any autobiographical resonance with Nevin’s “dizziness” has much to do with the gracious hospitality I have received while studying theology at this Catholic, Marianist university.
A number of friends and colleagues read drafts of various sections of this manuscript along the way. To list some of them is to risk the accidental omission of others. Nevertheless, I would like to thank, in particular, D. Michael Cox, Timothy Gabrielli, Derek Hatch, Justin Menno, and Elizabeth Newman for the gifts of their time and insights.

Finally, I would like to praise the patience, perseverance, and courage of my wife, Jennifer, who has been my companion during a season of life in which we have experienced great loss, faced frequent uncertainty, slept little, and yet received tremendous blessings. I would also like to thank my sons, Jonathan (two and a half) and Micah (nine months), for never failing to give me a reason to smile each day.
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION:
THE CATHOLIC TENDENCY IN AMERICAN PROTESTANTISM

Students of American Christianity know John Williamson Nevin as a primary architect of the nineteenth-century “Mercersburg Theology.” The Mercersburg Theology took its name from the southeastern Pennsylvania village where the fledgling seminary of the German Reformed Church was located from 1837 to 1871. In 1840, Nevin was hired as the seminary’s new professor of theology and biblical literature. He was a newcomer to the German Reformed Church, having been raised a Presbyterian, academically trained at Princeton Theological Seminary, and most recently employed by a Presbyterian seminary in Pittsburgh.

Another denominational newcomer, Philip Schaff, soon joined Nevin on the Mercersburg faculty. Schaff was a Swiss-born historical theologian recently trained at the prestigious German universities of Tübingen, Halle and Berlin. Academically, Schaff was associated with the German “mediating theology” (Vermittelungs-Theologie), a loose congerie of scholars attempting to reconcile the best of contemporary German thought with traditional Christian orthodoxy. In a practical, ecclesial expression of this mediating concern, Schaff was an enthusiastic supporter of the Evangelical Union Church of Prussia, which sought to bring Lutherans and Reformed Christians into the same communion, thereby bridging the fundamental divide within continental, magisterial Protestantism.

1 He was born Philipp Schaaf, later spelled his surname Schaf, and around 1847 decided on Schaff, which he retained for the remainder of his life.
Sydney Ahlstrom’s *A Religious History of the American People* described the brief collaboration of Nevin and Schaff at this remote hamlet in the mid-nineteenth century as “one of the most impressive constellations of religious thinkers in American history.” Schaff is the more famous of the pair of theologians associated with Mercersburg. After leaving Pennsylvania in the mid-1860s, he enjoyed an illustrious career at Union Seminary in New York City, becoming the father of the discipline of church history in the United States, a statesman in the emerging ecumenical movement, and a cultural and theological mediator between Germany and his adopted homeland. However, Nevin was the real driving force behind the Mercersburg Theology and it was he who authored the vast majority of its associated writings.

This project examines the Mercersburg Theology as Nevin’s attempt to address what he perceived to be a crisis of epochal proportions. Throughout his Mercersburg writings one finds references to the “church question” as the all-encompassing problem of the day. Though there was quite a bit of questing after the True Church taking place at the time—as many an American soul agonized over their choice between ever-expanding religious options—Nevin posed the issue in terms that set him firmly against the dominant temper of the era. For Nevin, the church question was not merely an attempt to assess the rival doctrinal claims of competing denominations. Rather, he urged his contemporaries to consider that the conditions for the possibility of fully Christian existence simply did not exist within the strictures of mainstream American Christianity. In a word, the critical thrust of the Mercersburg Theology was to convict antebellum

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3 The next chapter will note some of the most important historical scholarship on Schaff.
4 An extended treatment of the church question, and what it entailed for Nevin, will be the subject of Chapter II.
American Protestants that they suffered from a lack of *catholicity*, which we can define provisionally as “wholeness” (from the Greek *kath’olou*).

At the heart of this study is a conviction that Nevin’s life and thought is uniquely suited to serve as a usable past that can aid contemporary theological reflection. Two intriguing features distinguish his search for catholic Christianity in the nineteenth-century United States. The first is the apparent contradiction between, on the one hand, Nevin’s self-understanding as a theologian earnestly concerned with the welfare of the actual, concrete church and, on the other, a widespread perception that he was preoccupied with abstruse speculations far removed from the practical realities of common life in the United States.

The second feature is directly related. As we will see, the Mercersburg Theology was largely a failed attempt to raise and resolve the church question, and it had little impact on the immediate course of American Christianity. However, despite—or perhaps partially because of—this lack of success, interest in Nevin and the Mercersburg Theology has increased in recent years. In short, the church question remains with us. In what follows, I will engage in a contextual, diachronic reading of Nevin’s classic writings in order to show that the Mercersburg Theology is most instructive for contemporary engagement with the church question precisely because of the way in which Nevin tried—and failed—to resolve it to his own satisfaction.

Ahlstrom notably described the Mercersburg Theology as the “most creative example of the Catholic tendency in American Protestantism.”

The goal of this introduction is to provide an initial case for this project by, first, giving an account of this historically recurring tendency. With this in view, we shall conclude with Nevin’s own

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5 Ibid., 615. It is not entirely clear why Ahlstrom capitalized “Catholic” in his description.
summary exposition of the Mercersburg Theology in order to substantiate its paradigmatic status. We begin, then, with a preliminary description of the kinds of concerns that have given rise to a sub-tradition of catholic dissent from, and reform of, quintessentially American Christianity.

*Coming to Terms with “Americanized” Christianity*

After substantial first-hand investigation of the early nineteenth-century United States, Alexis de Tocqueville concluded:

The greatest part of English America has been peopled by men who, after having escaped the authority of the pope, did not submit to any religious supremacy; they therefore brought to the New World a Christianity that I cannot depict better than to call it democratic and republican . . . . From the beginning, politics and religion were in accord, and they have not ceased to be so since.⁶

Though his description can be qualified in important ways, we can begin with the general statement that a form of Christianity characterized by something like the democratic and republican ethos Tocqueville described became the dominant or default form of explicitly Christian religiosity very early in the nation’s history (i.e., within a few decades after the Revolution).

At the heart of the present project is a question of theological hermeneutics, or what might also be called theological historiography: how ought the rise of this distinctly American Christianity to be interpreted, so that such interpretation can guide contemporary ecclesial discernment? Such an inquiry weaves together historical and theological elements in several ways. First, it seeks theological assessment of a particular form of Christian existence that is identified or located historically. Second, it asks theological questions about a particular moment in the historical process (i.e., its causes

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and effects)—questions that invariably bring to the surface a number of contestable assumptions about the meaning of “history” itself. Ultimately, then, to raise such concerns is to inquire into our grounds for hope while we remain in the middle of things.

In keeping with an orientation toward the theological virtue of hope, I take it for granted that attempts to narrate the history of American Christianity in the presumptive or despairing terms of providential progress or disastrous decline are both inadequate and unsatisfying. Thus, clarity regarding these matters is highly elusive. As the first part of this section will show, historically and empirically sensitive accounts of the Americanization of Christianity tend to employ the morally ambiguous modes of irony and tragedy.

The Prototypical American Accord between Religion and Politics

In America’s God: from Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln (2003), historian Mark Noll agreed with Tocqueville that any attempt to understand the development of the United States and American Christianity must grasp the significance of the harmony between American democracy and quintessentially “American” religion. However, in this “social history of theology” in the early United States, Noll took care to show (pace Tocqueville) that a Christianity tailored to fit the sensibilities of American democratic and republican values did not appear on these shores ready-made. Rather, he argued that, as part of the effort to Christianize the young nation, theology in America was itself radically Americanized.

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7 Though problematic, for convenience’s sake, unless otherwise noted, I will follow common usage and employ “America” and “American” in reference to the United States of America and its citizens.

In impressive detail, Noll claims that nothing less than a theological revolution occurred during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as the broadly Protestant traditions that came to dominate the young nation broke with precedent to forge a unique synthesis of revivalistic Christianity, republican political theory, and common sense epistemology and moral philosophy. The success of this synthesis in Christianizing the former colonies led to the emergence of a de facto “evangelical establishment” in the national culture in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Armies of evangelists, social reformers, and educators (roles often combined in the same person) constructed an array of voluntary institutions that linked together large numbers of the population across state, regional, and denominational lines, provided avenues for civic engagement, and provided a shared language of piety and conviction upon which public discourse came to draw heavily. Contrast this informal establishment with the situation a century earlier, when the English settlements that would become the United States were a patchwork of genteel Enlightenment religion, a variety of more theologically austere varieties of Reformed Protestantism, tiny communities representing religious traditions outside the broad sweep of English-speaking Protestantism, and large numbers of religiously indifferent or unaffiliated persons. Though many colonies did have established churches, none of the groups just listed could assert dominance over the others on a national scale.

For Noll—again, contra Tocqueville—this was not simply the triumph of Protestantism or of a particular wing of the Reformation. Though there were of course significant continuities with previous and ongoing movements within transatlantic Protestantism, the form of Christian existence that emerged was a genuine historical
Noll’s account both complements and builds upon other scholarship that emphasizes the curious character of the political, social and cultural transformation that occurred around the time of the American Revolution.

**The New Order of the Ages**

By and large, it was gentlemen and merchants, not a phalanx of wild-eyed visionaries determined to turn the world upside-down, who led the American Revolution. Nevertheless, it is misleading to characterize the revolution and its effects as conservative in any simple way. The foundations had been shaken. In what Nathan Hatch describes as a “cultural ferment over the nature of freedom,” precedent now counted for little, and social deference could no longer be presumed. Convictions about the equality and virtue of the common citizen had been crowned with military victory and hallowed by patriotic sentiment. Voluntary association became the primary principle of social organization. Just like the people who continued arriving on these shores seeking freedom and fortune, traditional authorities and institutions would have to prove their worth.

It became particularly difficult for the nation’s Christians to distinguish developments in secular history from their hopes for history’s culmination in the millennial kingdom of Christ. The relatively wide-open social, political, and physical spaces of the United States enabled revivalistic Protestantism to gain tremendous momentum and institutional weight. To their supporters, the great revivals of the

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11 In *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), Nathan O. Hatch notes that, beginning in the late eighteenth century, American ministers sought a way to assign the new American republic a major role in the scheme of providential history. They accomplished this through bringing the republican values of civil and religious liberty to the heart of redemptive history. The result was what he terms “republican eschatology” (145-48, 170-71). I owe this reference to Dr. Philip Thompson.
eighteenth century, and their reverberations into the nineteenth, were signs that the Holy Spirit was ushering in a renewed age of faith. With vision tinted by the post-revolutionary afterglow, it seemed clear to virtually all—as the new national seal proclaimed—that a new order of the ages (novus ordo seclorum) had indeed been inaugurated.

The important point here is simply that early nineteenth-century Euro-Americans were generally inclined to characterize the geographical expanse that separated the United States from Europe as a providential means of their emancipation from the burdens of history. Immanuel Kant’s famous call for rational human agents to free themselves from a self-imposed submission to inherited traditions was, in its context, a politically radical and progressive proposal.12 By contrast, for most Americans (including most American Christians), such counsel was now simply common sense.

Minority Report

A few decades after the Revolution, Tocqueville marveled at the combination of social dynamism and relative stability this “cultural ferment” had brought to the young republic. He knew that many readers in his native France would believe such a combination both monstrous and incomprehensible, as they were convinced that liberty and religion were mortal enemies. Thus, he is often cited in support of American exceptionalism, or the view that the United States is uniquely exempt from the patterns of the past and the temptations to which other nations have succumbed. Democracy in America certainly has subsequently been used to promote the view that the United States—and, likewise, its distinctive forms of Christianity—have indeed solved the perennial riddle of the proper relations between liberty and authority, Church and State.

However, this would require a selective reading of Tocqueville’s classic that downplays or even ignores its more ambivalent and even pessimistic elements. Similarly, as regards the evangelical synthesis with American democracy, Noll grants that this classic form of American religion proved wildly successful in Christianizing a frontier civilization, stabilizing a society unmoored by revolution, and extending religious agency to people and groups heretofore relegated to the margins. Moreover, he assumes that any Christian committed to missions and evangelization will have trouble wishing that things could or should have happened otherwise, as it is nearly impossible to imagine that the faith could have taken root in American soil any other way. Yet Noll also concludes that the mainstream theology that provided the rationale for the evangelical synthesis was lax in its stewardship of rich theological concepts (e.g., freedom, virtue, and providence).

The result, and the tragedy, in his view, is that by mid-century, the same habits of thought and piety that created an open door for successful evangelization were unable to provide a coherent theological response to the nation’s crisis over slavery and constitutionalism. The Americanization of Protestant theology helped construct a great new civilization, but the price for doing so was the trivialization of that theology itself. Ultimately, in the absence of a compelling and convincing demonstration of Christian unity in truth, arguments gave way to armies. As Abraham Lincoln famously observed in the midst of the Civil War, “both sides read the same Bible and pray to the same God.” A social and cultural order built on the foundations of the Bible and the common sense of the common citizen had come apart.

*Divided by Faith*

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A recent sociological study contains contemporary echoes of Noll’s account. In *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, Michael Emerson and Christian Smith conclude that the conceptual resources white American evangelical Protestants characteristically employ for understanding and responding to the world enable the structural and systemic dimensions of a racialized society to remain invisible and ultimately reinforced.\textsuperscript{15} The authors describe their study as “a story of how well-intentioned people, their values, and their institutions actually recreate racial divisions and inequalities they ostensibly oppose.”

As their research concludes, white American evangelicals who work from what Emerson and Smith label their default “cultural tool kit” propose solutions to racial issues that are highly limited in scope (e.g., strive to be personally colorblind and seek forgiveness for past wrongs, make friends with someone from another race, eliminate overt legal discrimination to ensure equal opportunity, etc.).\textsuperscript{16} Moreover, while some of these proposed remedies may be costly on a personal (it may be more precise to say, “interior”) level, they rarely require financial or social sacrifice or imply the need for significant changes to the racialized ecclesial, economic, and cultural status quo. The primary elements of this cultural tool kit are, according to the authors, “accountable freewill individualism,” “relationalism” (giving interpersonal relationships primary

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\textsuperscript{15}Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided By Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). The “evangelicals” studied were primarily white Americans who self-identified as “evangelicals” and who the authors describe as committed to “engaged orthodoxy” (2-4). By employing the more precise term “racialized” instead of the more highly charged label “racist” to describe American society, Emerson and Smith are not attempting to soften the harshness of their assessment. Rather, their point is to emphasize the systematic and largely tacit dimensions of the problem—i.e., that racialization (the [disparate] distribution of social goods along racial lines) is much more “normal” and ingrained in the structure of everyday life. As such, it is much more than a matter of a critical mass of Americans expressing overt racial prejudice in their speech and actions.

emphasis), and “antistructuralism” (the “inability to perceive or unwillingness to accept social structural influences”). Their identification of these tacit assumptions is roughly compatible with Noll’s description of the “evangelical synthesis.” Both give greater precision and critical edge to Tocqueville’s description of a Christianity that is essentially “democratic” and “republican.”

Emerson and Smith situate their conclusions within a particular reading of American history:

Over the centuries, religion was . . . at times used by white and black Christians to call for America to realize its ideals. Those ideals include equality and freedom. Freedom has come to be freedom from—freedom from oppression, freedom from discrimination, and freedom from each other. In sum, through the long, arduous struggle, where religion aided racial change, it has been unidirectional: like America itself, it has occasionally helped to free people, but has been unable to bring them together or overcome racialization.  

Of particular note here is the fact that the same kind of agency and the same blind spot or recalcitrance is attributed to both ‘religion’ and ‘America.’ In their most baldly-stated version of the thesis: “the structure of religion in America is conducive to freeing groups from the direct control of other groups but not to addressing the fundamental divisions that exist in our racialized society.”

The Challenge of Catholicity

As with the tragic denouement of Noll’s narrative in the Civil War, Divided by Faith highlights a problem of concern for all Americans, but its findings are particularly tragic and scandalous for Christians who believe that the credibility and integrity of their faith is intimately related to their visible unity. The study also reinforces the thorny nature of the problem: contrary to some popular stereotypes, evangelicals excel at self-

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17 Ibid., 48.
18 Ibid., 18.
criticism, and have for some time been eager to find new ways of pursuing racial reconciliation. Nevertheless, they have historically been unable or unwilling to attend to the social-structural patterns and intellectual assumptions that channel their characteristic activism in unanticipated, sometimes tragically self-defeating, ways.

It was out of frustration with many of these very issues that Noll delivered his jeremiad, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (1994), in which he nearly concluded that it was impossible to be both evangelical and committed to the life of the mind (“the scandal . . . is that there is not much of an evangelical mind”).

*America’s God* can thus be read as Noll’s attempt to show in detail both how the scandal came to be and the poignancy of the dilemma it raises for who have known at first hand the vital piety and vigorous discipleship that characterizes American evangelicalism at its best. He concluded that, by the mid-nineteenth century, most thoughtful Americans believed themselves to face a choice between “profundity at the expense of Christianity and . . . Christianity at the expense of profundity.”

Profundity is not immediately identifiable as a theological category, yet it carries some of the same connotations of the creedal affirmation of the Christian Church as catholic. In popular parlance, catholicity tends to be equated with universality. This usage reflects the most common usage of the term in the polemical situation following the Reformation. Roman Catholic apologists appealed to the geographical extent and numerical strength of their communion as validation of its claims to be true Catholic Church. Simultaneously, Protestants began insisting that the one true church was invisible, and frequently replaced the word “catholic” in the creeds with “universal” or,

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20 Noll called the book an “epistle from a wounded lover” (ibid., ix).
as Martin Luther once proposed, “Christian.” However, for roughly the last two centuries, an impressive ecumenical consensus has supplemented this qualitative and extensive connotation with an emphasis on catholicity as a qualitative or intensive predicate, which—as we noted earlier—can be pithily defined as “wholeness.”

This vaguely defined concept captures the thrust of the studies summarized above. Both Noll’s historical narrative and the sociological analysis of Emerson and Smith reveal a quintessential pattern of American Christianity that displays a problematic and perhaps constitutional lack of proportion. Moreover, this imbalance or one-sidedness has led to dire practical, especially social, consequences. In Scandal, Noll concluded that American evangelicals have been distinguished by a tendency to privilege action over reflection and to trust the immediate deliverances of intuition and common-sense over wisdom gleaned from and handed over from formal or traditional authorities, etc. His prescribed remedy was not a reversal of these polarities but a commitment to retain each element in some kind of harmony. Evangelicals will surely always retain a characteristic accent or style, he granted, but they must take care that they avoid confusing the “distinctive” with the “essential.”

Noll’s conclusion in Scandal raised the question of how the essential is to be determined, maintained or pursued. At what point does the preservation of a distinct “style” or “accent” become a literal de-formation into sub-Christian sectarianism?

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22 See the historical overview of the changing semantic range of “catholic” and “catholicity” in Chapter 1 of Avery Dulles, The Catholicity of the Church (Oxford [Oxfordshire]: Clarendon Press, 1985).
Conversely, at what point might a critical response to the characteristic emphases of “Americanized” Christianity become itself uncatholic?

If our definition of catholicity has thus far remained vague, it should be noted that “vagueness,” as distinguished from both over-determination and pure indeterminacy, is part of the technical vocabulary of pragmatist philosophy. Thus, catholicity bears a resemblance to both traditional categories of aesthetic judgment (e.g., form, harmony, proportion, etc.), and the virtues in moral theory—which can also be initially defined by contrast with opposing ways in which it is possible to miss the mark.

On this account, then, judgments about catholicity involve practical reasoning about concrete particulars in light of a given end. For heuristic purposes, in a 1990 article, theologians James Wm. McClendon, Jr. (a Baptist) and John Howard Yoder (a Mennonite) identified three distinct yet related senses of catholicity. The first, the “generic” sense, follows the earliest usage of "catholic church" (e.g., the Martyrdom of Polycarp) by highlighting that “quality in congregations and Christians that renders them whole or well-rounded or typical as opposed to being one-sided or partial.” Their summary of this first (and primary) sense provides a good explication of what was described above, in shorthand form, as qualitative catholicity, or “wholeness.”

One might even in these instances translate katholike as "ordinary." It consisted "not only in unity of organization or in the promise of a world-wide universality, nor yet in the bond of charity: it consisted rather in a whole via vitae which included belief, worship, and morals.” Or, in the words of John Henry Newman, it was “dogmatical, devotional, practical all at once.” Provided that all these are understood as exegeting the New Testament idea of Christian fullness (Eph.

2:22b) and as pointing beyond themselves as well to the crucified and risen Christ who is their ground (1 Cor. 3:11).25

Their second sense is “ecumenical catholicity,” which has to do with the extent of the church, and “the limits of its authentic presence.” Their final sense, and the latest to appear historically, is the sense of Catholic as "regular" or "ordinary" as “opposed to those considered irregular or heretical.” In other words, it has to do with the contestable claims of a particular, concrete communion to preserve or possess the conditions for generic (or qualitative) catholicity while displaying the breadth appropriate to ecumenical catholicity.26

As Avery Dulles observed in The Catholicity of The Church, a formal notion of “catholicity” has a broad aesthetic and moral appeal. However, such consensus quickly disappears when judgments must be made about a particular “via vitae which include[s] belief, worship, and morals”—i.e., the Church. It is in this sense that Dulles insisted that catholicity cannot be severed from catholicism—his term for McClendon and Yoder’s third sense of “catholic”:

Catholicity suggests universality in a rather abstract sense, whereas Catholicism is more closely connected with the structures that make for the transmission and retention of that particular fullness which was given in Christ to the apostles and the apostolic communion. In this sense Catholicism may be said to include not only universality but also unity, holiness, and apostolicity, or, more generally, all that is required for the essential fullness of the Church.27

We turn now to a classic, explicitly theological assessment of American Christianity, in order to begin moving from a formal discussion of catholicity to consider the specific

27 Dulles, Catholicity, 8.
shape of efforts to discern the identity and/or pursue the formation of a truly catholic church in the United States.

_Protestant Substance and Catholic Principle_

In the mid-1930s, toward the end of a brief sojourn in the United States, Dietrich Bonhoeffer penned a now-famous theological reflection on American Christianity. He began—fittingly so, in light of the discussion thus far—by setting forth two tendencies that any such analysis must avoid. One of these errors is to forget that American Christianity, so curiously strange to German eyes, has a history. To rush to a rarefied, categorical judgment, he argued, is to ignore that “God speaks differently to his church in different times.”

Bonhoeffer also maintained that a “genuine encounter” must avoid a relativistic approach that reduces American Christianity to its geographical, political, or social setting. In his view, such interpretations are tedious and, ultimately, false, because they obscure or disregard the “mutual obligation that churches have for each other’s proclamation and doctrine.”

As long as we are interested in American peculiarities, we are merely operating in the realm of detached observations. It is a different question what God does to and with his church, in and with America, how God reveals himself to the church and whether and how we may recognize God in that church. With that, the question of God’s word, of God’s will, and of God’s action is raised between us. It is the same word, the same commandment, the same promise, the same office, the same church-community of Jesus Christ that is at stake, both in America and among us. And only the quest for this does justice to the matter. Indeed, the Reformation is not to be understood as a typically German event; it does not work this way. The same is true with respect to the forms and events of foreign churches. They cannot

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29 Ibid., 438.
be explained objectively on the basis of the characteristics of other peoples. There is something more, and that is the issue here.\textsuperscript{30}

Two aspects of Bonhoeffer’s assessment are important for this opening discussion. The first is his descriptive insistence, in a manner reminiscent of Tocqueville, on the “Protestant” character of the United States and its relation to the distinctively American concept of denominationalism.

Americans have been captivated from the beginning by the notion of a special providence that reserved the discovery of American until the emergence of Protestantism. America is thus the only country in which the concept of “Protestantism” gained church-historical significance and reality, for America wants to be not the country of the Lutheran or the Reformed church but precisely the country of “Protestantism” in its full denominational breadth.\textsuperscript{31}

For Bonhoeffer, it is crucial to understand that America experienced the consequences of the Reformation without participating in the theological controversy over the “one holy universal church of Jesus Christ on earth” that gave rise to the “churches of the Reformation” in the first place. Thus, “where churches are not divided by the struggle about the truth, the unity of the church should already be won. But the real picture is exactly the opposite. Precisely here, where the question of truth does not become the criterion either for community or for church schisms, there is greater fragmentation than anywhere else.”\textsuperscript{32}

From Bonhoeffer’s perspective, American Christians have largely given up on the idea of a visible, tangible church. Because “church” is generally associated with “too much clericalism, autocracy, confessional conceit [Dünkel], intolerance, persecution of heretics, a desire for worldly power and political favors” it has been replaced with the

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 439.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 447.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 442.
denomination, which “is not a theological concept.” Denominational self-understanding is characterized by a “certain humble hesitation” in that denominations dare not claim for themselves the name of the church of Jesus Christ because “this name seems too big and too dangerous to them.” As the churches of the Reformation became “Protestantism,” the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church became an essentially invisible, and primarily eschatological reality, with denominations serving in a penultimate role as its visible, constituent members:

For American Christendom, the unity of the church of Jesus Christ is not so much something that is given originally by God and already exists [Seiendes] as it is something that is demanded and should be [Sein-sollendes]. Church is less origin [Ursprung] than it is goal [Ziel]. The unity of the church here thus belongs to the realm of sanctification.

In keeping with his warning against too-easy theological condemnation of this “strange” Christianity, Bonhoeffer entered sympathetically into the historical rationale for this modus vivendi. As heirs of the ecclesial violence occasioned by the Reformation struggle for the true church, America’s Christians simply “stand astonished” before its results, “and can merely accept with great humility what they find and heal the wounds.”

Therefore, “it is ultimately the faithfulness toward one’s own church history that is expressed in this strange relativization of the question of truth in the thinking and action of American Christendom.”

For Bonhoeffer, faithfulness to one’s own history is ultimately not the same as faithful listening to the Word of God. Thus, the second immediately relevant feature of this essay is his famous contention, on the basis of the above description, that this

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33 Ibid., 440.
34 Ibid., 441.
35 Ibid., 443.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 448.
predominant form of American Christianity is best understood, both historically and
teologically, as “Protestantism without Reformation.”38 Bonhoeffer’s verdict is
important for establishing the peculiar historical and theological shape of the question:
what would it mean to reform the historical consequences of the Reformation as
displayed in the “new order of the ages”?39

This question involves something more substantial than the traditional Reformed
confession that the church should be reformed and always reforming (reformata et
semper reformanda). Rather, it presumes that adherence to such a critical principle as a
basic axiom (perhaps in the form of an unacknowledged, or “irrational,” tradition of anti-
traditionalism), can become itself an inoculation against fundamental criticism.39 From a
“Protestant”40 perspective like Bonhoeffer’s, this opens up the possibility for the
historically contingent judgment that a different kind of wholesale re-formation,
analogous to the crisis of the sixteenth century, has become necessary.

In the twentieth century, Paul Tillich popularized an interpretation of Christianity
as a dialectic of Protestant principle and Catholic substance.41 Many of those who
adopted his typology have subordinated the latter to the former. That is, the principled
“Protestant” tendency is seen as the bearer of Christianity’s critical, prophetic form, and
the source of its historical dynamism. Consequently, the Catholic substance is viewed as

38 Bonhoeffer articulated his verdict in language that brings to mind the early writings of his
contemporary Karl Barth: “God did not grant a Reformation to American Christendom. He gave strong
revivalist preachers, men of the church, and theologians, but no reformation of the church of Jesus Christ
from the word of God” (Ibid., 461).
39 I have in mind here something like political theorist Louis Hartz’s claim that the “liberal
tradition” in the United States has its roots in an “irrational Lockianism.” See Louis Hartz, The Liberal
Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution (New York:
Harcourt, Brace, 1955), 11, et passim.
40 Bonhoeffer would have preferred “Evangelical” (Evangelische) to “Protestant.”
more or less inert matter that would, left to its own devices, accrete a disproportionate amount of foreign debris, or gradually dissolve into nothingness.

In *The Catholicity of the Church*, Dulles offered a corrective to Tillich’s dialectical typology, which rapidly became a rather hackneyed truism in theological discourse, by arguing that it is much more theologically appropriate to speak of a shared “Christian substance” and mutually contesting “Protestant” and “Catholic” principles. The Protestant principle “prevents one from blurring the distinction between God and creature and from attributing divine status to that which is finite and defectible.” For its part, the Catholic principle “criticizes the critics,” warning them “not to banish God from his creation and not to minimize the gifts of God in Christ and in the Holy Spirit” (with this latter phrase serving as a brief identification of the “Christian substance”).

The Catholic principle is an acceptance of mediation, and indeed of visible mediation. It asserts that God ordinarily comes to us through the structures that are given, especially those to which his gracious promises are attached, such as Incarnation, Scripture, sacrament and apostolic ministry. The first attitude of the believer toward Christ, the Bible, the Church, and tradition ought not to be one of suspicion but, on principle, one of trusting receptivity. If it later appears that there are reasons for suspecting that the mediation has been faulty, the time will come for criticism and even protest. But if criticism comes too early it can be corrosive of faith. 42

In Bonhoeffer’s reading, supplemented by Noll’s historical narrative, Tocqueville’s “accord” between American democracy and Protestant Christianity represented a historical situation in which it was now possible to speak of a Protestant substance (i.e., the historical “given” of mutually acknowledging, yet divided denominations, with a form of the Protestant principle as their raison d’être). In sum, then, we can define the “catholic tendency in American Protestantism” as the attempt, or as an analogous series of attempts, to reform or renew American Christianity by an assertion of the “catholic

principle” (with its emphasis on the given, mediating channels of divine grace—particularly the Church), on behalf of the Christian substance, which is ultimately the Triune God, given to humanity in Jesus Christ.

We can discern traces of this catholic tendency in the historical and sociological studies with which we opened this section. In Emerson and Smith’s presentation, the counter-weights to the evangelicals’ “cultural tool kit” and, more generally, the “structure of religion in America,” are classically or typologically “catholic” emphases (e.g., a positive account of human institutions and, more generally, an intrinsically social anthropology that challenges both “accountable freewill individualism” and “relationism”). In addition, it is often overlooked that Noll’s Scandal of the Evangelical Mind was not a mere diatribe against the stereotypical anti-intellectualism of popular American movements. It is crucial to note in this regard his more nuanced insistence that “the question for American evangelicals is not just the presence of an anti-intellectual bias but the sometimes vigorous prosecution of the wrong sort of intellectual life.”

Noll used explicit theological criteria to arrive at his normative judgment that even sophisticated evangelical thought has tended to be of the “wrong sort.” He concluded that evangelicals have not matched their laudable zeal for understanding the Bible with “efforts to understand the world or, even more important, the processes by which wisdom from Scripture should be brought into relation with knowledge about the world.” As such, these evangelical theologies seem to imply a vision of God’s

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43 It should be noted that Christian Smith himself entered the Roman Catholic Church less than a decade after writing Divided by Faith.
44 Noll, Scandal, 12.
relationship to the world that recalls the ancient heresies of Manicheism (as seen in a wooden dichotomy between “Bible knowledge” and “worldly wisdom”), Gnosticism (evidenced in a view of theologians as the keepers of esoteric, timeless, and placeless truths), and Docetism (reflected in theology that treats everyday, concrete realities as if they were mere appearances).

In other words, Noll based his critique in *Scandal* on substantive convictions about the person of Christ enshrined in classic monuments of Christian orthodoxy. It is easy to overlook the fact that, as an epigraph for his *cri de coeur*, Noll printed the text of a Christmas motet by sixteenth-century composer Jacob Handl: “A wondrous mystery is proclaimed today: all natures are renewed. God has become human: he remained what he was, and what he was not he became, suffering neither confusion nor division.”

The Chalcedonian language here makes a point Noll kept mostly implicit in the text. To reason Christianly about the world is not to adopt a kind of static “worldview”—but to develop a mind conformed to the Christian substance—paradigmatically and paradoxically present in the Incarnation itself. For perhaps understandable political reasons, he did not describe the scandal of the evangelical mind in terms of a lack of catholicity or—even more controversially—catholicism (in Dulles’ formal sense of “the structures that make for the transmission and retention of that particular fullness which was given in Christ to the apostles and the apostolic communion”). However, given that American evangelicals who have heeded Noll’s call for the cultivation of a Christian mind have invariably turned to Catholic resources (in the third, “churchly” sense of McClendon and Yoder), this raises a question: in what sense do

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46 Ibid., 2.
47 However, this is the explicit theme of Noll’s recent, *Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).
such Christians remain evangelicals? More broadly, what is the telos of Protestantism reformed on the basis of the Catholic principle? Will it remain in essential continuity with historic Protestantism, does it merely represent a path toward irresistible reunion with Rome, or does it represent a tertium quid whose vague contours have yet to be defined?

These are some of the primary questions that inform this study of “the most creative example of the Catholic tendency in American Protestantism.” Before turning to a more formal description of the project in Chapter One, we conclude with a brief description of the Mercersburg Theology. Three preliminary points are in order here to establish the Mercersburg Theology as a prototypical as well as paradigmatic instance of the catholic tendency. First, it appeared in response to the original or classic form of “Protestantism without Reformation,” as described in Noll’s account of the early nineteenth-century “evangelical synthesis” of revivalistic Protestantism, republican political theory, and common sense philosophy. Second, the Mercersburg Theology took shape in a context in which Tillich’s Protestant-Catholic dialectic was playing itself out in the form of real-world, sometimes brutally violent, political conflict. Indeed, historians have been enticed to investigate the Mercersburg Theology precisely because of the fascinating incongruity of a Catholic tendency within American Protestantism at a time when anti-Roman Catholic nativism in the United States was at full tide. Third, as we will see from the description that will serve as our guide in the chapters ahead, the distinguishing features of the Mercersburg Theology line up almost directly as responses to the well-known quadrilateral of “activism”, “Biblicism”, “conversionism”, and
crucicentrism” that historian David Bebbington formulated as a heuristic for identifying
the otherwise rather amorphous phenomenon of Protestant “evangelicalism.”

What was the Mercersburg Theology?

A systematic presentation of the “Mercersburg theology”—in the form of a self-
contained text, clarifying foundational principles and tracing out their implications for a
series of traditional doctrinal topics or loci—does not exist. One plausible explanation
for this is the fact that Nevin did not have the time for such a substantial undertaking. The
Mercersburg movement in theology and church reform took shape in the precarious
institutional climate common to most of the cash-strapped colleges and freestanding
seminaries that dotted the landscape of nineteenth-century America. When Nevin arrived
in Mercersburg in 1840, this village in the mountains of southeastern Pennsylvania had
been home to the German Reformed Church’s educational institutions for three years,
ever since the seminary moved from York to join a preparatory academy and liberal arts
college already there.

Two years after joining the seminary faculty, Nevin was asked to add to his
duties the interim presidency of Marshall College (where he also taught classes) and the
chairmanship of its board. After a decade of service, Nevin resigned from Mercersburg
Seminary in 1851. Shortly afterwards, he ended his institutional tenure in Mercersburg
altogether by stepping down from the Marshall presidency in 1853. Despite his numerous

48 Bebbington, Evangelicalism, 2-19. Again, Noll used these categories in 1994 to define roughly
the audience to whom the Scandal of the Evangelical Mind was directed.
49 Emmanuel V. Gerhart, a former student at Mercersburg, wrote a systematic theology that bore
the influence of his teachers, Nevin and Schaff. See Gerhart, Institutes of the Christian Religion (New
York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1894), and Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., “Emanuel V. Gerhart and the Mercersburg
Theology” (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 1972).
obligations (as teacher, administrator, and denominational liaison), these years in Mercersburg were the most prolific and creative of Nevin’s career.

At some point in the early 1860s, Nevin described the Mercersburg theology for his former student, Dr. Henry Harbaugh. His response, which has been reprinted in several anthologies of Nevin’s writings, serves as a touchstone for the particular angle of investigation this study will pursue. Generally speaking, the “Mercersburg theology” this dissertation will examine is the one described in Nevin’s letter.50

His retrospective account began with a disclaimer:

What is called the ‘Mercersburg System of Theology’ grew into shape without calculation or plan. It owes its existence properly not to any spirit of philosophical speculation as has been sometimes imagined, but to an active interest in practical Christianity. Questions of religious life have governed in succession the course of its history.51

Having established this basic point, which implies that the Mercersburg Theology was under some suspicion for being insufficiently activist (and, perhaps, “biblical”), Nevin next related the “external history” of the movement through an account of its notable publications and the controversy they engendered. He cited a series of five texts published between 1843 and 1848, of which he had written all but one (the exception being his colleague Philip Schaff’s inaugural address, The Principle of Protestantism). At the heart of this study will be a reading of each of these writings.52

50 John W. Nevin, “Letter to Dr. Henry Harbaugh,” in Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin, ed. Charles Yrigoyen Jr. and George H. Bricker (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1978). According to the editors, “[T]he intent of the letter addressed to Dr. Nevin by Dr. Harbaugh is unknown. The archives of the Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society do not have the original letter addressed to Dr. Nevin. Nor is the letter by Dr. Nevin dated. We know that it was written after 1860, for it was in that year that Henry Harbaugh received the Doctor of Divinity degree from Union College” (405).
52 The list included Nevin’s tract The Anxious Bench (1843), his sermon on “Catholic Unity” (1844), Philip Schaff’s inaugural address at Mercersburg, The Principle of Protestantism (1844), Nevin’s Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper (1846) and, finally, the tract Antichrist: The Spirit of Sect and Schism (1848). This is far from an exhaustive list of Nevin’s
Starting in 1849, *The Mercersburg Review* was established to serve as a forum for articulating “Mercersburg” principles and extending them to new questions. Nevin wrote an impressive number of its articles while serving as editor for the journal’s first five years (he resigned the post at the same time of his professional retirement). Just what was the distinctive theological outlook given a forum in the *Mercersburg Review*? Again, in his words:

Its cardinal principle is the fact of the Incarnation. This, viewed not as a doctrine or speculation, but as a real transaction of God in the world, is regarded as . . . the essence of Christianity, the sum and substance of the whole Christian redemption. . . . The distinguishing character of the Mercersburg Theology, in one word, is its Christological interest, its way of looking at all things through the Person of the crucified and risen Saviour.\(^{53}\)

This statement goes some way toward an explanation of why Nevin felt such a need to deny that the Mercersburg theology was the product of esoteric speculation. His claim that “Christ saves the world not ultimately by what he teaches or by what he does, but by what he *is* in the constitution of his own *person,*” rendered him virtually unintelligible to his fellow American Protestants because it represented a major departure from the standard emphasis on the atoning, salvific *work* of Jesus on the cross (i.e., Bebbington’s “crucicentrism”).

In a terse exposition, Nevin spelled out several theological implications of this “Christological” starting point. To take the Incarnation as fundamental, he claimed, is to maintain that Christianity is ultimately a new order of existence that is simultaneously “natural” and “supernatural.” Once this is granted, the church cannot be a peripheral matter left to questions of practical utility. Rather, it becomes an object of faith itself, to

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\(^{53}\) Ibid., 409.
be seen as “the presence of a new creation in the . . . world of nature—the body of Christ through which as a medium and organ he reveals himself and works till the end of time.”

These claims require a great deal more explication. For now, however, what needs to be emphasized is that Nevin reiterated his insistence that an “active interest in practical Christianity” undergirded the Mercersburg movement and its theology. As he saw it, an Incarnational standpoint was necessary because it “embraces . . . all that enters into the conception of the Church Question—the problem of problems for the Christianity of the present time.” The next chapter will take a closer look at what the church question entailed for Nevin. By this point, however, it should be clear that the church question was a kind of practical expression of Catholic reform.

We conclude this look at Nevin’s description of the Mercersburg theology with his ambivalent assessment of the state of the matter in the 1860s.

That the [Mercersburg] system has been unable to solve in full the difficulties belonging to this great subject [i.e., the church question], its friends have never pretended for one moment to imagine. On the contrary, they have always confessed their sense of vast practical embarrassment confronting their views. But they have not considered this a sufficient reason for refusing to affirm what has appeared to them to be biblically or historically true, in spite of such inconvenience. Facts and principles have a right to challenge attention at times, even if no satisfactory scheme can be offered for their application.

This is far from an admission of defeat. But Nevin’s words here raise the tension between ideal and reality that was one of the Mercersburg theology’s formal characteristics, and they articulate the pathos (“vast practical embarrassment”) that attended its reception in nineteenth-century America.

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54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., 410.
56 Ibid.
This unfinished task, with all its difficulties, has something to do with what Dulles described as the “depth” dimension of catholicity—i.e., the church’s calling to take root in each of the places it inhabits— as well as Bonhoeffer’s remark about the responsibility of being faithful to one’s church history. Attempts to reform or renew American Christianity on the basis of a principled commitment to catholicity (i.e., to bring “Catholic principle” to bear on this Protestant substance) face a curious dilemma: how does one dissent from a tradition of dissent without reinforcing its constitutive habits? Yet we must be careful to take the “sited” nature of the theological task seriously without smuggling in a supposedly theologically-neutral notion of context as a tacit norm. This is surely what Nevin meant about the biblical and historical facts and principles that continue to command attention, despite the difficulty of their practical application.

The chapters that follow will primarily take the form of contextual, historical theology. This presentation of Nevin’s life and thought is intended to serve as a kind of parable of the “Catholic tendency in American Protestantism,” with all its promise and perils. The next chapter will clarify the nature of my thesis that the Mercersburg Theology is most relevant for contemporary reflection on the church question because of the way in which Nevin failed to resolve it to his own satisfaction. Then we will identify some of the specific contributions of this project through a comparison with existing Mercersburg scholarship.

CHAPTER II
THE CHURCH QUESTION AND THE MERCERSBURG THEOLOGY

In 1845, Nevin published a translation of *The Principle of Protestantism*, an expanded edition of his new colleague Phillip Schaff’s inaugural public address as a professor at the seminary of the German Reformed Church in America. To this, Nevin contributed a lengthy foreword and appended the text of his own recent sermon on "Catholic Unity." Together, these texts represented the opening statement of what came to be known as the Mercersburg Theology.

As he urged readers to heed Schaff’s arguments, Nevin made this programmatic assertion:

The great question of the age undoubtedly is that concerning the church. It is evidently drawing to itself all minds of the more earnest order, more and more, in all parts of the world. Where it comes to be apprehended in its true character, it can hardly fail to be of absorbing interest; nor is it possible perhaps for one who has become thus interested in it to dismiss it again from his thoughts. Its connections are found to reach in the end, through the entire range of the Christian life. Its issues are of the most momentous nature, and solemn as eternity itself. No question can be less of merely curious or speculative interest. It is in some respects just now of all practical questions decidedly the most practical. In these circumstances it calls for attention, earnest, and prayerful, and profound.¹

As we saw in the introduction, Nevin penned a description of the Mercersburg Theology roughly two decades after he wrote these words. At that point, in keeping with these earlier claims, he affirmed the intensely practical concerns that led to the emergence of "what is called the 'Mercersburg School of Theology.'" He denied any desire to have founded a mere school of thought, though he acknowledged that, viewed from a dogmatic perspective, the Mercersburg Theology was marked by a consistently "Christological" character. Even then, he insisted, its cardinal principle was the "fact" of the Incarnation, apprehended most essentially "not as a doctrine or speculation, but as a real transaction of God in the world."\(^2\)

For Nevin, it was only from such a standpoint that one could possibly contemplate all that was involved in the church question, which he still considered "the problem of problems for the present time." He concluded his portrait by acknowledging that the Mercersburg Theology had yet to answer or resolve all aspects of the church question. In fact, he admitted, its adherents suffered from "vast practical embarrassment" in this regard. All the same, "they have not considered this a sufficient reason for refusing to affirm what has appeared to them to be biblically or historically true, in spite of such inconvenience."\(^3\)

Viewed in retrospect, this outcome was unsurprising. As he had conceded back in 1845, the church question “is clearly one of great difficulty and hazard . . . [a] subject manifestly that is not to be disposed of . . . in such flippant wholesale style as with some might seem . . . sufficient for the purpose."\(^4\) This was all the more reason for Nevin’s willingness to admit Mercersburg’s shortcomings: better to have recognized “the great

\(^3\) Ibid., 410.
\(^4\) Nevin, “Introduction,” 52.
question of the age,” even while failing to master it, than to have remained in ignorance of its magnitude and difficulties.

The goal of this chapter is threefold: to provide an overview of the narrative and argument contained in the chapters to follow; to locate this historical-theological study in relation to existing scholarship on Nevin and the Mercersburg Theology; and, most importantly, to clarify the nature and significance of my proposal that the Mercersburg Theology merits attention precisely because of the way that Nevin's quest to answer the church question ended in at least partial failure (i.e., "vast practical embarrassment").

Though our focus is ultimately on Nevin, we begin with *The Principle of Protestantism*, in which Schaff sketched the hopes of the emerging Mercersburg movement in bold strokes on a vast historical canvas. This text is important because it provides the most lucid and systematic introduction to what the church question entailed in the mid-nineteenth century United States.

*The Principle of Protestantism*

In April 1844, as he prepared to leave the prospect of a prestigious academic career in Germany for a tiny seminary in the wilds of America, the young *privatdocent* Philip Schaff was ordained to the gospel ministry. He chose Acts 16:8-10 as the text for his ordination sermon, discerning a Macedonian call to "come over here and help us" in the request that he serve his exiled German brethren in Pennsylvania.5 As Schaff understood it, he would be coming to the aid of an American church perched on the "threelfold abyss" of "HEATHENISM, ROMANISM, [and] SECTARIANISM."6

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Half a year later, Schaff began this missionary service with his first formal address in the United States, delivered in Reading before the General Synod of the German Reformed Church. For his inaugural statement as the denomination's new theologian, he revised the earlier sermon. What had been primarily a diagnosis of specifically American ills was now a general consideration of "The Principle of Protestantism in Relation to the Present State of the Church."

According to Schaff, "every period of the Church and of Theology has its particular problem to solve. The main question of our time is concerning the nature of the Church itself in its relation to the world and to single Christians." Specifically, he continued, the church question needed to be asked—as a serious question, not as a foregone conclusion—because Protestantism was presently beset by multiple, serious problems. It was therefore necessary to follow the ancient counsel for those in need of wisdom and begin by seeking self-knowledge.

Because the scourges currently afflicting Protestantism find their justification in an incomplete grasp of the meaning and significance of the Reformation, he claimed, this would first require setting the historical record straight. An authentic reformation displays both continuity and discontinuity and lies between the extremes of "revolution" and "restoration," he asserted. Once this is understood, "neither the unhistorical radical on the one hand, nor the motionless slave of the past on the other, can find in the true representation of the Reformation either precedent or pattern."

From such a perspective, Schaff continued, the Reformation will be seen as the product of the best, though mostly latent, tendencies of late medieval Catholicism. As

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8 Ibid., 57-58.
such, it represented a genuine and necessary historical development of the one Christian Church that had existed since the days of the apostles and whose current had flowed through the main stream of European Christendom. Protestants therefore have a right and duty to claim the doctrinal and liturgical traditions of the catholic Christian past as their own.

Schaff traced the ecclesial convulsions of the sixteenth century to their positive source in a material or "life" principle (justification by faith in Christ alone) and a formal or "knowledge" principle (scripture alone as the church's preeminent authority). He contended that the Roman Church's refusal to recognize in the Protestant solas a more profound apprehension of the one gospel entrusted to the apostles had made church division tragically necessary. As a result, it compromised its claim to genuine catholicity by steadfastly refusing to follow "the divine conduct of history." However, he cautioned, contemporary Protestants had no grounds for boasting. By slighting the positive, theological character of the Reformation and focusing solely on the protest against the late medieval Catholic Church's undue stress on extrinsic, objective authority, Protestants were presently in jeopardy of forfeiting their inheritance and succumbing to a disproportionate, sub-Christian emphasis on subjective freedom.

Diagnosis

The first of the twin diseases afflicting contemporary Protestantism, according to Schaff, was the rationalism, or "one-sided theoretic subjectivism," which had recently led certain German scholars to new heights of audacious impiety. Though American Protestants in 1844 might give thanks that bold heterodox speculation had not gained a

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9 Ibid., 73.
10 Ibid., 131. As examples of German rationalism, Schaff listed D.F. Strauss (star pupil of Schaff's own teacher, Ferdinand Christian Baur), Bruno Bauer, and Ludwig Feuerbach.
substantial foothold in their country, Schaff gave his audience no room for self-congratulation. That outright rationalistic infidelity did not seem to pose a major threat was not necessarily because Americans were generally more pious, he insisted. It owed more to the fact that Americans generally and American Christianity in particular were characterized by a typically "English" aversion to theory. The danger, again, lay in one-sidedness. The intellectual challenges raised by German historical and theological science may not be troubling the minds of many Americans, but they represented real problems, and American theology was ill equipped to face them when they eventually attracted popular attention.  

Boldly assuming the role of *magister* for his new church, Schaff claimed that American Protestantism was debilitated by the mirror image of German rationalism—a proclivity toward "one-sided practical subjectivism," that had taken the form of *sectarianism.* His description of the "sect plague" brought on by the proliferation of religious movements in the United States is a classic example of the initial impression American religion tended to make on nineteenth-century European observers. Such outsiders witnessed "a variegated sampler of all conceivable religious chimeras and dreams." This was a land where "every theological vagabond and peddler may drive here his bungling trade, without passport or license and sell his false ware at pleasure."  

With a combination of *naiveté* and daring, Schaff continued to depict his new homeland:

Anyone who has, or fancies that he has, some inward experience and a ready tongue, may persuade himself that he is called to be a reformer; and so proceed at once . . . to a revolutionary rupture with the historical life of the church, to which

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11 "Where a man does not think, it requires no great skill to be orthodox. But the orthodoxy that includes no thought, is not worth a farthing" (Ibid., 136).
12 Ibid., 149.
he holds himself immeasurably superior. He builds himself of a night accordingly
a new chapel, in which now for the first time since the age of the apostles a pure
congregation is to be formed . . . and is not ashamed to appeal continually to the
Scriptures, as having been sealed entirely, or in large part, to the understanding of
eighteen centuries, and even to the view of our Reformers themselves, till now at
last God has been pleased to kindle the true light in an obscure corner of the New
World!  

In this historical moment, Schaff continued, America's Protestants must rediscover the
church as an object and medium of saving faith and must grasp that the church ought by
its nature to be characterized by unity:

If then we would contend successfully with Romanism, we must first labor to put
away from ourselves the occasions that now lay us open so broadly to its attacks.
Away with human denominations, down with religious sects! Let our watchword
be: One spirit and one body! One shepherd and one flock! All conventicles and
chapels must perish, that from their ashes may rise the one Church of God,
phoenix-like and resplendent with glory, as a bride adorned for her bridegroom.

For Schaff, the present divided state of Protestantism cast doubt on its constituent
members’ claims to represent the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church of the creeds.

Complacent denominationalism that acquiesces in a divided church, and primitivism that
exalts the Bible and private judgment over against all historical development and
legitimate church authority, must be rejected as sinful sectarianism that is harmful to
souls. In particular, he noted, as the Reformed tradition had been the source of most of
this splintering, it should take the lead in repairing the damage. How, precisely, would
this be done?

Prescription: Evangelical Catholicism

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13 Ibid., 150.
14 Ibid., 155.
15 "Thus the deceived multitude, having no power to discern spirits, is converted not to Christ and
his truth, but to the arbitrary fancies and baseless opinions of an individual, who is only of yesterday. Such
conversion is of a truth only perversion; such theology, neology; such exposition of the Bible, wretched
imposition. What is built is no church, but a chapel, to whose erection Satan himself has made the most
liberal contribution" (Ibid., 149-150).
A contemporary movement across the Atlantic had already offered one remedy. The Oxford movement (so named because most of its leaders hailed from various Oxford colleges) for catholic renewal of the Church of England had been raising the church question for roughly a decade. Within their own communion, the “Tractarians” (another label, taken from their primary political organ, the *Tracts for the Times*) were distinguished from both the low-church, evangelical party, with its zeal for vital, personal faith and piety grounded in a classically Protestant *ordo salutis*, as well as the more doctrinally latitudinarian adherents of a “broad church” position. The "Puseyites,” as they were also called (a reference to Tractarian leader Edward B. Pusey, Regius Professor of Hebrew at Christ Church, Oxford), argued that the Church of England was an authentic branch of the ancient Catholic Church. As such, its essential character pre-dated the Roman corruptions that led ultimately to the Reformation. On this basis, they sought the restoration of the doctrinal purity, ecclesiastical discipline, and devotional consensus of patristic Christianity.

Schaff believed the Oxford movement to be “an entirely legitimate and necessary reaction” to the present malaise. But he ultimately judged it an inadequate response to the crisis. For one thing, he insisted, the Tractarians place unwarranted and unrealistic hopes in a particular office (i.e., the historic episcopate in apostolic succession) that is neither necessary nor sufficient to guarantee genuine catholicity. More fundamentally, he argued, their general disdain for the Reformation displayed a worrisome historical escapism and an unwillingness to acknowledge Protestantism as a real advance in the apprehension of the gospel.

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16 Ibid., 158.
Schaff's own prescription was cautiously vague, preferring to emphasize first principles and openness to the future. He was convinced that the better trends of "the age" all pointed toward a rediscovery of the objective element in the Christian life—especially as found in the concrete, historical institution of the church. At the same time, he insisted that this renewed churchly Christianity could not and must not eradicate the recent centuries' expansive gains on behalf of subjective freedom. Therefore, he concluded, the only proper answer to the church question was to anticipate and prepare the way for an as-yet-unknowable higher synthesis that could best be described as "Protestant [or Evangelical] Catholicism." A single organization was not absolutely necessary for the realization of this goal ("as the Puseyites dream"). Rather, any progress toward such reconciliation and reintegration "must proceed from the deepest ground of the religious life itself, then it will provide for itself a suitable external form. What this will be, we are not prepared to say."18

As he brought the address to a close, Schaff conceded that the prospects for Protestant Catholicism in the United States looked bleak indeed. In their divided state, the nation's assortment of Protestant denominations faced an increasingly confident American Catholic Church bolstered numerically by immigration and energized by successes such as the recent conversion of the New England intellectual, Orestes Brownson. Nevertheless, he concluded optimistically, the mysterious ways of providence could be discerned near at hand. Since great movements often break forth only at a point of crisis, it would be only fitting that the United States serve as the stage upon which the

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17 In the historical sense of German Evangelische.
18 Ibid., 210.
diseases of Protestantism play themselves out, making a course correction virtually inevitable:

May the New World, enwombing the life spirit of almost every nation of the Old, prove the birth soil of this new era for the church! As the distractions of Protestantism have been most painfully experienced here, so here also may the glorious work of bringing all the scattered members of Christ's body into true catholic union be carried forward.19

However great the errors into which the late medieval Church fell, and however benighted by "Popery" its institutional descendant remained, Schaff was convinced that Protestantism and "Romanism" were destined for a better, shared future. In America, Protestantism would consummate its historical task and Evangelical Catholicism would rise from the ashes.

Summary

Thus, Philip Schaff upon his arrival in the United States. As tangible evidence that his hopes for Protestant Catholicity on this continent were not unfounded, he noted with pleasure and amazement the recent discovery that he and his new colleague, John Nevin, agreed on all essential points, despite their disparate backgrounds. He quoted extensively from Nevin's recent sermon, on "The Nature and Duties of Christians with regard to Catholic Unity," to demonstrate their substantial common ground on the church question.

Based on this summary of Schaff's address we can characterize the church question as an inquiry into the theological status of Protestantism, in light of the fact that the Reformation had not ushered in the climax of salvation history.20 As such, the church

19 Ibid., 218.
20 According to Schaff, when thinking about the Reformation, one should recall how "the last days of Luther and Melanchthon, who had attained to such a full measure of evangelical liberty and joy, [were] characterized, nevertheless, by a deep melancholy" (125).
question was historical (i.e., "what is God doing with/for/to the Church?") as much as it was dogmatic (i.e., "what is the Church?"). It was therefore a live question and a real problem. In his lengthy introduction to Schaff's address, Nevin acknowledged that his colleague's claims represented a substantial challenge for American Protestants. To consider the church question was to risk existential angst—a discomforting prospect few could endure, let alone willingly embrace.

Nevertheless, Nevin insisted, the concerns at its heart were both legitimate and profoundly serious. The fact that earnest, intelligent Christians were attracted to Puseyism and even converting to Rome was uncomfortable evidence that Protestantism needed to "advance to a new position in order to save itself." To fail to take fundamental criticisms to heart, he added, would reflect a sub-Protestant desire to "cling to the old superstitiously, like the papists in the age of the Reformation, when the fullness of time is come for the new."

Unfortunately, Nevin continued, recent history suggests that Schaff's claims will be dismissed or treated in confused and contradictory ways. This is largely because the issue was as difficult to grasp as it was important. He implied that his language was strained and somewhat opaque because familiar assumptions and terminology were themselves part of the problem. In other words, it was critical to establish and far easier to articulate what the controversy over Puseyism and resurgent "Romanism" was not about. He lamented that the church question was regularly, though falsely, posed as a matter of establishing whether Christianity is a religion of "forms" or of the "spirit" (i.e.,

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21 Nevin, “Introduction,” 42. "No new phase of religion could so spread and prevail as this has done, within so short a period of time, if it did not embody . . . the moving force of some mighty truth, whose rights needed to be asserted, and the want of which had come to be felt in the living consciousness of the church, vastly further than it was clearly understood" (Ibid., 34).

22 Ibid., 43.
"ecclesiasticism" or "evangelism"); whether salvation is an individual concern or something that is constituted by church membership; or whether proximate theological authority (i.e., next to the Bible itself) is to be located in the individual Christian's private judgment or whether holy scripture (and the human conscience) should be bound by mere human authorities. For Nevin, those who persisted in framing the debate using such dyads disqualified themselves as serious interlocutors, since the stale premises on which they rely were largely responsible for the current predicament.

This sketch of the emerging Mercersburg Theology's opening statement reveals an attempt to reconcile or overcome the antitheses or antinomies bequeathed to Western Christianity by the seismic changes of the early modern era. In a formal sense, one could say that Protestants calling for the emergence of Protestant (or Reformed, or Evangelical) catholicity are declaring that Protestantism becomes sub-Christian to the extent that anti-Catholicism constitutes part of its raison d'être. In the United States of 1844, however, such claims were far from merely formal.

The Mercersburg Theology in Polemical Context

Not far from where Schaff delivered his address in Reading, and just a few months earlier, sections of Philadelphia had endured a near-complete breakdown of civil order lasting for more than a month. The cumulative violence, in which anti-Catholic “nativist” mobs faced off with defensively organized and armed Catholics, left a number of people killed or injured and several Catholic churches destroyed. Recent waves of Catholic immigration, mostly from Ireland, and primarily to the growing cities of the East
coast, had fanned the smoldering fears and animosities of centuries-old religious conflict into flame.²³

Major Protestant denominations joined in this xenophobic frenzy. In 1835, the Presbyterian General Assembly took the trouble to pass a resolution declaring the Roman Catholic Church a "false church." A decade later, a similar statement from a Presbyterian Assembly pronounced Roman Catholic baptisms to be invalid. Against such a backdrop, it is little wonder that Nevin expected a rough reception for *The Principle of Protestantism*.

Shortly after its publication, Nevin’s fears were validated. Critics in the German Reformed Church brought heresy charges against the Mercersburg professors. The most specific charge had to do with some of Nevin’s statements on the Lord’s Supper that allegedly “savored of transubstantiation,” but the more basic problem was simply that both professors were judged to be unacceptably soft on “Popery.” In its formal brief, the Philadelphia Classis of the German Reformed Church insisted that this exercise in doctrinal discipline was necessary in order to uphold the fundamental truth that the Roman Catholic Church was the great apostasy, "the man of sin, the mother of abominations, etc., and as such was destined to utter and fearful destruction."²⁴

The synod ultimately exonerated the pair. Nevin had made some bitter enemies in the denomination, but he had also attracted a significant base of support. A distinctive "Mercersburg Theology" survived to add its voice to antebellum American theological debate and to infuse its vision for Evangelical Catholicism into the German Reformed

Church and beyond. Nevertheless, all this was certainly a shock to Schaff. He had been trained in an era of relative Catholic-Protestant *rapprochement* in Germany, spurred on by the Romantic Movement's aesthetic attraction to its pre-Enlightenment past (particularly the "Catholic" middle ages). He had bemoaned American anti-intellectualism, but he was also unprepared for the seriousness with which Americans' apparently engaged in theo-political controversy.

In his survey of *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, Karl Barth described the mediating school in German theology with which Schaff had some association, as, ultimately, boring.\(^{25}\) He preferred the bold impiety of a Feuerbach or the shrill anathemas of a sometimes benighted, defensive orthodoxy to a theological program that assumes from the outset that no fundamental conflicts or problems could ultimately exist between the Church’s proclamation and “modern thought.” The merits of Barth’s historical judgment aside, it would be hard, historically speaking at least, to describe the Mercersburg Theology similarly. To insist on the importance of the church question in 1840s Pennsylvania was not to call for moderation or compromise. Whether intended or not, this American version of a mediating theology announced itself, not with inoffensive words of peace, but with a sword.

*Clarifying the Thesis: The Problematic Legacy of the Mercersburg Theology*

We now turn to a brief survey of the denouement of the Mercersburg Theology's quest for Evangelical Catholicism. Though the ultimate goal is to examine Nevin's contribution to the Mercersburg Theology, it is necessary to spend more time with Schaff at the outset because general perceptions of the Mercersburg Theology have tended to

\(^{25}\) This is the thesis of the chapter on Alexander Schweitzer (1808-88), whom Barth considered the prototype of the nineteenth-century “mediating theologian.” {Barth, 1973, #37997@569-76}
reflect his ultimate evaluation of it. Schaff's departure from Mercersburg in 1865 reflected his own growing desire to distance himself from some of the positions he had been associated with since joining Nevin in Mercersburg two decades earlier.

*The Church Question and the New Order*

The conceptual binaries Nevin hoped to surmount in order that the church question might be rightly apprehended (e.g., “heart” [or “spiritual’”] religion vs. “formalism”; the Bible vs. human traditions) reflected the specific contours of his American context. Here, though the vocabulary of Reformation-era debates were certainly still operative, the contours of the church question were shaped by such factors as the American republic's "lively experiment" in religious liberty and church-state separation, the warm-hearted piety of the previous century's Great Awakening and its zeal for vital religion, a pronounced reverence for individual rights and for conclusions that pass the scrutiny of common sense, and a drive to assert freedom from the immediate past. In 1844 Schaff was convinced that mainstream American Christianity could be understood as essentially Protestant, albeit a somewhat sickly version, afflicted by Puritanism's "rugged abstract spiritualism."26

But to what extent was "Protestant" an adequate description of this Christianity that had aligned itself so closely with the United States and its self-understanding as the "new order of the ages" (*novus ordo seclorum*)? Mark Noll has argued that "this nineteenth-century [American] Protestant evangelicalism differed from the religion of the Protestant Reformation as much as sixteenth-century Reformation Protestantism differed from the Roman Catholic theology from which it emerged."27 Similarly, as we noted in

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the introduction, what Schaff discerned from afar as "one-sided practical subjectivism,"
Nathan Hatch has described as the wholesale "democratization of American Christianity,"
the result of a "cultural ferment" over the nature of freedom, catalyzed by the former
colonies' newly-won independence.\footnote{Hatch, Democratization.}

Schaff ended *The Principle of Protestantism* by referring to a prophetic tradition
that originated with the fourteenth-century Franciscan Joachim of Fiore, and had recently
been revived and revised by F. W. J. Schelling. In this historical schema, the historical
development of the church was prefigured in the persons of the apostles Peter, Paul, and
John. The Petrine (or "Catholic") era representing the principle of authority (made
temporarily necessary by the cultural infancy of the evangelized pagan nations) gave way
to Pauline (or "Protestant") Christianity, with its "principle of movement" and the "free
justifying power of faith." At last, these principles would be reconciled in a dawning

Schaff gave Schelling's vision a qualified endorsement, calling it an "ingenious
and beautiful" speculation. He matched his sense of an impending crisis for Protestantism
with optimism about the ability of Christianity's historical current to surpass all
obstructions and find a new, healthier course. But what if—as numerous Americans were
eager to insist—this had already occurred? What if classic Protestantism was indeed an
interim stage in church history, but a stage whose historical task was being consummated
and fulfilled in the new world—not by the restoration of the "objective element" to its
proper place, but by shedding the remnants of tyrannical priestcraft, superstition, and
formulaic religion that attached themselves to apostolic Christianity as it made a devil's
bargain with "Caesar" and transformed into European Christendom?

As scholars have noted, internal tensions appear throughout *The Principle of
Protestantism*. In his stress on the basic continuity between Protestantism and pre-
Reformation Catholicism, Schaff displayed a typically "Romantic" commitment to
organic historical development. At the same time, in the contrast between (excessively)
objective "Catholicism" and (excessively) subjective "Protestantism" and in the
expectation of their sublation (*Aufgehoben*) in a higher unity that would preserve the best
of both, he employed the dialectical method of G.W.F. Hegel's philosophical Idealism
(mediatiored primarily through Schaff's teacher, F.C. Baur). From the latter perspective,
on his own terms, Schaff would have to interpret Protestantism as the product of a
revolution, rather than a mere reformation.

Despite this eclecticism regarding the precise mechanism of historical change,
there is an even more basic tension between Schaff's general theoretical commitment to
“historical development” and his substantive theological convictions about the church. As
historian James Hastings Nichols concluded, *The Principle of Protestantism* articulated a
"triumphalist view of church history—of history as theodicy, a demonstration of God's
purposes in time." If the course of events did not seem to be turning in the direction of
Evangelical Catholicism, was this a sign that the prophecy's fulfillment was delayed? Or,

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30 On this, see Payne, “Schaff and Nevin,” and James Hastings Nichols, *Romanticism in American
31 Schaff provided his own account of this concept, and its importance for philosophy, in Philip
Schaff, *What is Church History?: A Vindication of the Idea of Historical Development* (New York:
Garland, 1987 [1846]).
32 James Hastings Nichols, introduction to Schaff, "Theses for the Time," in James Hastings
would the schema, and its substantive details, have to be adjusted in light of a new reading of the signs of the times?

*How Schaff Learned to Stop Worrying and Love American Denominationalism*

As was noted in the introduction, after the Civil War Schaff left the small fold of the German Reformed Church and his relative seclusion in Mercersburg for the more cosmopolitan environs of Union Seminary in New York. From there, he served with distinction as a church historian, ecumenical statesman, and an important interpreter of the United States for European audiences. Though congruent with themes of *The Principle of Protestantism*, his later statements on the church question show a distinct trajectory. Two examples illustrate this transformation.

Shortly before his death, in an address delivered at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, Schaff once again prophesied the "Reunion of Christendom."

Whereas he had earlier insisted that the various bodies of divided Protestantism must come to see their separateness as no more than a temporarily necessary evil, he was now eager to distinguish between structurally distinct denominations (which could be seen as providential "blessings," even if they had acquired quasi-permanent status), and actual sects (which self-righteously insist upon their separateness and, thus, remain a "curse" upon Christendom). Just as the scriptural canon's witness to Christ contains four diverse gospels, so, too, the work of God's kingdom is now being brought forward by diverse denominations in their individual integrity. Thus, he now claimed, they should neither be wished away nor forcefully harmonized.33

Nearly a decade earlier, Schaff spoke before the Evangelical Alliance in Copenhagen. Though he had registered serious doubts about this pan-Protestant federation while at Mercersburg, due to what he considered its generally unhistorical and excessively anti-Roman Catholic character, he was now working tirelessly on its behalf. Thus, he modified his earlier language in a way that reflected his greater appreciation for cooperative efforts that fell short of "organic unity." Though still committed to his earlier vision of "one shepherd, and one flock," he now insisted that Christ’s flock consisted of more than one "fold."

In Principle of Protestantism, Schaff had already dismissed the idea that a single ecclesiastical organization or structure was necessary for the unified, Evangelical Catholicism of the future. What had changed in the subsequent decades, however, was the metaphysical clarity of his outlook. In 1844, he had been unwilling to speculate in detail about the structural shape of Evangelical Catholicism, but he was sure that it would find a "suitable external form" to express its unity. Forty years later, Schaff made it clear that "outward" unity need not be a part of a reunited Christendom, since Christian unity is "essentially spiritual."

Because of statements like these, it is easy to portray Schaff's stay in Mercersburg as a time of transition and acculturation. Little by little, as he became more at home in his new country, he abandoned the alarmist tone of his inaugural address and came to reconcile himself to the United States and its unique religious settlement, which he heralded as a paradigm for the Christian future. As the title intimates, this is the thesis of


Stephen Graham's *Cosmos in the Chaos: Philip Schaff's Interpretation of Nineteenth-century American Religion* (1995). In this study, based on his dissertation at the University of Chicago, Graham traces the ways in which Schaff continued to adjust the details of his conception of the church and of Christian unity to fit his increasingly positive evaluation of American democracy and American-style voluntary and denominational Christianity.

Schaff's biographer, Klaus Penzel, argues that the views of the later Schaff are best understood, not as a departure, but as a reaffirmation of his basic convictions. By this reading, it was in his formative encounters with theologian F. August Tholuck (at Halle) and historian Augustus Neander (in Berlin) that Schaff acquired the Pietism that would serve as his theological polestar, providing the basis for his ultimate insistence on the fundamentally interior nature of Christian unity. For Penzel—who somewhat sheepishly admits to an indulgence in psychohistory—Schaff's Mercersburg years were part of a "belated stage of rebellion," during which he flirted with high church theology (and the political and social conservatism attending it in Prussia) in order to assert independence from these mentors for the sake of intellectual integrity.³⁶

*Taking Stock*

Like the conceptions of progressive historical development so prevalent in the nineteenth century, the consensus briefly surveyed here is that Schaff's Mercersburg period was far from representative of his mature thinking. Thus—by extension—the Mercersburg Theology as an attempt to raise and resolve the church question, and as a response to distinctively American Christianity, is invariably viewed as an inadequate protest, an overly hasty reaction to the unattractive surface of American religious life that

failed to penetrate through to its deepest insights and real strengths.\textsuperscript{37} It would appear that anyone seeking to appropriate the Mercersburg theology for constructive purposes has to deal with this burden of proof.

Despite this formidable challenge, I submit that the Mercersburg Theology continues to merit study. For one thing, the church question and the hopes of \textit{The Principle of Protestantism} have not gone away. To select just a single contemporary example, in 198?, the inaugural issue of the academic journal \textit{Pro Ecclesia} explicitly referred to the "Evangelical Catholicism" of Nevin and Schaff as a precursor of its efforts. In a statement that sounds like a verbatim quotation from Nevin’s literary corpus, Carl E. Braaten insisted that it would be the decided editorial stance of this new journal that

\begin{quote}
the tragic schism of the sixteenth century was [not] meant to last until the eschaton. We will work to overcome it in faithfulness to the Gospel. The present state of Protestantism as a denominational system is nothing more than interimistic. It must be transcended in a reunited church of the future that embraces both evangelical depth and catholic breadth. It has not been revealed to us how this shall come about. Nevertheless, our sights are set on nothing less.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

Similarly, just as the church question remains with us, so do predictions of a radically new epoch in salvation history. By the early twenty-first century, it is easy to historicize the frequent appearance of prophets that eagerly herald the dawn of a new, and more spiritual age of the church.\textsuperscript{39}

More importantly, we have already seen that Nevin, for his part, never considered the Mercersburg Theology to have spoken the last word on the church question. In the

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{37} Note that this conclusion is virtually identical to Schaff's assessment of Anglo-Catholicism in \textit{Principle of Protestantism}.
\end{flushright}
chapters to follow, I will contend that, at a particular point of crisis, Nevin glimpsed that he had exhausted the conceptual resources at his disposal in his quest to answer the church question. Specifically, from the beginning of the Mercersburg Theology in the early 1840s up to his resignation from his administrative, teaching, and editorial duties in Mercersburg slightly more than a decade later, Nevin ruled out three ways of resolving the church question: triumphalistic low-church (American) Protestantism, ultramontane Roman Catholicism, and, finally, an ideal synthesis taking the form of an Evangelical-Catholic "church of the future." This final claim—i.e., that Nevin eventually judged the basic position of the Principle of Protestantism to be, in some sense, untenable—is somewhat speculative and controversial, and will need to be qualified. As we will see, my argument is that Nevin’s conclusion that he had reached an impasse with regard to the church question was not a fall into despair (though such a state of mind and spirit was surely close at hand). Rather, he was displaying the kind of theological integrity and humility about the workings of providence that leaves space for genuine hope.

The final part of this chapter begins with a chapter-by-chapter summary of the main body of the dissertation. Since the presentation will proceed chronologically, this section also contains a historical overview of the classic period of the Mercersburg Theology. After this, we conclude with a sketch of the subsequent history of the Mercersburg Theology and a review of scholarly literature on Nevin that informs this study.

Synopsis

The main body of the dissertation consists of three sections, which follow the structure and major themes of Nevin's description of the Mercersburg Theology from the
1860s. Chapters three and four focus on the "problems of practical Christianity" he insisted were the catalyst for the Mercersburg Theology. Chapter three examines the formation of Nevin's convictions in the context of antebellum American religion, society, and culture via a biographical narrative of Nevin's life up to his arrival in Mercersburg. Chapter four is devoted to a close reading of the first text Nevin listed in his summary of the Mercersburg Theology, *The Anxious Bench* (1844 and 1845). In the course of writing and revising this response to what he believed was a pastoral crisis for the German Reformed Church, Nevin articulated principles that set his "catholic tendency" formally in motion and that led him to conclude that the church question was in fact the great challenge of the age.

Chapters five through seven use an explication of the three remaining stand-alone texts cited in Nevin’s letter to give a diachronic account of the “Mercersburg Theology” proper. Chapter five examines Nevin's sermon "Catholic Unity" (1845) and chapter six treats his most famous and longest work, *Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed Doctrine of the Lord's Supper* (1846). Both texts feature the distinctive "Christological interest" Nevin attributed to the Mercersburg Theology, and they begin to draw forth the implications of this position for the church question.

*Mystical Presence* was a response to controversy, and it was the catalyst for yet more controversy. Chapter six concludes with an overview of Nevin's now-classic debate with Princeton Seminary's Charles Hodge, which was occasioned by Hodge's caustic review of *Mystical Presence*. Their exchange leads into chapter seven’s examination of Nevin's final "Mercersburg" tract, the highly polemical *Anti-Christ: The Spirit of Sect and Schism* (1848). By this point, Nevin had made his case for the cardinal principle of
the Mercersburg Theology (i.e., the "fact" of the Incarnation) and presented the core of his critique of what he tended to call "modern Puritanism" or "Psuedo-Protestantism." Therefore, at the conclusion of this section, we will take stock of the Mercersburg Theology as a relatively coherent theological program, noting and responding to several common criticisms in light of this particular presentation.

By January 1849, the major themes of the Mercersburg Theology had been established and Nevin gained a distinct forum for his views in the pages of the Mercersburg Review. For the next five years, he served as the journal's editor and major contributor. The final two chapters describe how a satisfactory resolution to the church question ultimately eluded him.

Chapter eight shows how, during these first years of the journal, Nevin's expansive efforts to press and refine the distinctive claims of the Mercersburg Theology heightened basic tensions within his attempt to mediate the post-Reformation divide in antebellum America. In 1850, Nevin acquired some ballast to his catholic tendency by entering into a controversy with the American Catholic apologist, Orestes Brownson. As a convert who had himself struggled for years with the church question, Brownson was one of the very few Americans able to critique the Mercersburg Theology on its own terms. Though Nevin offered a strong critique of Brownson's “Romanism,” Brownson himself raised a troubling question about the Mercersburg Theology. With all his reverence for the Incarnation and all his concern for the church question, could Nevin identify a church that remains present in the midst of history, mediating Christ’s salvific life to the world, or would the Mercersburg Theology merely offer a rather free-floating, mediating theology only able and willing to conjure a "church of the future"?
A few years after his confident critique of Brownson, Nevin gradually resigned his teaching, administrative and editorial responsibilities in Mercersburg. He now entertained serious doubts about his ecclesial status and confided to a family friend that he was "greatly troubled with the claims of the Catholic Church” such that “it has become for me a question of life and death. One great object of disengaging myself from all past responsibilities has been that I might be more free to examine it.”

Chapter nine begins by presenting key steps in the progression of Nevin's thought from his critique of Brownson's "Romanism" in 1850, to his confession, three years later, that he was no longer capable of offering a vigorous defense of Protestantism. Following this, I will show that, while Nevin eventually regained sufficient peace of mind and soul to remain in the German Reformed Church, there is compelling evidence for concluding that a crucial theological dimension of his personal and theological crisis remained intact. To support this somewhat speculative historical claim, I will argue that there is a correlation between Nevin's inability to bring the church question to a satisfactory resolution and his equally inconclusive consideration of the classic scholastic inquiry into the motive for the Incarnation. This is a crucial link, since the Mercersburg Theology insisted upon a determinant relationship between the church question and the “Christ question” (i.e., Christology). In short, Nevin seems to have concluded that, just as insufficiently disciplined Christological speculation threatens to reduce the transcendent mystery of the primary Christian object of faith, so, too, attempts to provide a clear and distinct account of “historical development” (or its absence), upon which the Reformation

can be justified as necessary (or, conversely, categorically dismissed) remove the Incarnation from its rightful place as the cardinal “fact” of human history.

The study culminates in a brief epilogue containing a meditation on the contemporary state of the church question in light of the preceding narrative. Much has changed since the mid-nineteenth century. This includes the state of the various Churches and/or traditions (in themselves and in their mutual relations) as well as the different resources (both philosophical and historical) available to various contemporary quests for “Evangelical Catholicity.” Yet there are a number of striking parallels between the present, rapid pace of cultural, economic and political change and the "cultural ferment over the nature of freedom” out of which the church question eventually emerged in the nineteenth century.

*The Mercersburg Theology after Mercersburg*

As we just saw, Nevin did not abandon Protestantism for Rome after he resigned his positions in Mercersburg. He remained a member of the German Reformed Church for the remainder of his life, which lasted three more decades. Though his literary output decreased substantially after the Mercersburg years, he did not remain entirely out of public life and theological debate. In the 1860s, Nevin came out of retirement to serve as President of Franklin and Marshall College in nearby Lancaster, where he lectured on aesthetics.⁴¹ He had also, for a time, chaired a committee charged with producing a new liturgy for the German Reformed Church. After the promulgation of the commission’s proposal in 1857, former Mercersburg allies began taking seriously the longstanding charge that Nevin and his disciples could not be trusted to maintain their church on the

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⁴¹ In 1853, Marshall College moved to Lancaster and merged with Franklin College. Mercersburg Seminary followed suit a decade later.
high ground of Protestant principle. Controversy over the liturgy, which was designed to be “a bond of union both with the ancient Catholic Church and the Reformation” as well as “the product of the religious life of our denomination in its present state,” lasted nearly three decades and nearly split the church.  

After Nevin's death in 1886, his students kept his signal concerns alive for a time, though largely without Nevin's practical urgency and dialectical acuteness. Moreover, the times had changed substantially. Even though Nevin had sought something much more than better manners, by the post-Civil War “gilded age,” time and upward social mobility had smoothed many of the rough edges off the dominant expressions of American Protestantism, as compared with the rough-and-tumble milieu of the antebellum years. In addition, to Nevin’s chagrin, the theological challenges posed by Darwinism, biblical criticism, and the increasingly naturalistic and materialistic tenor of modern thought more generally now seemed much more urgent and important than the church question. Finally, while for a time in the mid-nineteenth century Nevin, Schaff, and their fellow travelers may have discerned an auspicious opening for Evangelical Catholicism that would include real rapprochement with Rome, Pope Pius IX's Syllabus of Errors and the First Vatican Council's definition of papal infallibility in 1870 seemed to have shut the door on that prospect.

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42 Philip Schaff, “The New Liturgy” Mercersburg Review 10 (1858): 220. The most important early historical works on the Mercersburg Theology are Theodore Appel's Life and Work of John Williamson Nevin (1889), and James I. Good's History of the Reformed Church in the Nineteenth Century (1911). Appel was Nevin's student, and he eventually succeeded Nevin to the presidency of Mercersburg (later Lancaster) Seminary. His work largely consisted of lengthy excerpts and paraphrases from Nevin's own writings. Whereas Appel's biography verged on hagiography, Good's sided unapologetically with Mercersburg's opponents as he wrote his denominational history. Both provide important early perspectives as well as illuminating anecdotes that subsequent historians have been able to corroborate and supplement.

43 As noted in the introduction, Nevin’s student, Emanuel V. Gerhart, gave a systematic presentation of his appropriation of the Mercersburg Theology in his Institutes of the Christian Religion (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884). See also Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., “Emanuel V. Gerhart and the Mercersburg Theology” (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 1972).
Nevin's life certainly bears a tragic character. His “dizziness” (as his critics labeled his personal crisis over the church question in the mid-1850s), combined with Schaff’s change of stance, adds to the problematic legacy of the Mercersburg Theology. A relatively recent article from the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* provides the clearest example of the case for concluding that the Mercersburg Theology was simply a failure.

In 1990 David Layman, a Mennonite scholar writing a dissertation on Nevin, charged theologians James Wm. McClendon, Jr. (a Baptist) and John Howard Yoder (a Mennonite) with producing little more than sophisticated versions of the ahistorical primitivism the Mercersburg theologians critiqued so thoroughly in the nineteenth-century. Layman argued that by holding themselves formally aloof from the classic liturgical and creedal traditions of historic, mainstream Christianity, their substantially similar visions for the Christian life, in which each gathered congregation of believers has direct, "mystical" (in McClendon's "baptist vision") recourse to the New Testament church and apostolic witness for its guidance, forfeit any claim to catholicity.  

In reply, McClendon and Yoder observed that Layman's attempt to call the Mercersburg Theology as witness against them was deeply flawed. Despite Nevin and Schaff's laudable desire for genuine catholicity, particularly in the form of visible, embodied church unity:

> There is something . . . unconvincing about . . . advocating today, as if it were somehow 'classical,' a position adopted by only two persons, abandoned by both of them, never approved by any confessional communion, and extinct for over a century.  

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45 McClendon and Yoder, “Christian Identity,” 575, n. 46. The authors' opening discussion of the contested, equivocal senses of "catholic" and "catholicity" was discussed in Chapter I.
Several of these charges need to be corrected or qualified. (In particular, McClendon and Yoder employed the later conclusions of Schaff himself as a primary witness against the Mercersburg Theology, but they failed to acknowledge Nevin’s substantially greater contributions to the movement, or the fact that he never gave anything like a similar retraction of his earlier positions on the church question.) Yet their basic point stands: a theological program concerned with the visible organic unity of all those “in Christ” had failed to make significant headway in achieving churchly expression of this unity—even within its own denomination.  

Against this backdrop, I contend that Nevin’s description of the Mercersburg Theology from the 1860s—which stressed its origins in practical, churchly concerns, insisted upon its Christological and Incarnational character, and acknowledged its unresolved problems as regards the church question, while refusing to deny its fundamental principles—provides a hermeneutical key for an interpretation of the Mercersburg Theology that illuminates its enduring relevance as well as its substantial difficulties. Since a sizeable amount of scholarly literature has already been devoted to Nevin and the Mercersburg Theology, a survey of this scholarship will further explicate this claim and clarify the contribution of this study before we turn to the presentation itself.

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46 In the twentieth century, the German Reformed Church entered into a series of denominational mergers in the twentieth century and is now part of the United Churches of Christ. The most enduring ecclesial legacy of the Mercersburg Theology is in those congregations within the denomination that still honor the Mercersburg movement as part of their heritage, particularly via celebration of the Mercersburg-inspired liturgy. This constituency provides the majority of members for the Mercersburg Society, which in 1985 launched the New Mercersburg Review as a forum for promoting “the concept of the Church as the Body of Christ, Evangelical, Reformed, Catholic, Apostolic, organic, developmental and connectional.”
Mercersburg, Nevin and the Church: The State of the Questions

McClendon and Yoder based much of their verdict that the Mercersburg Theology did not represent a viable path for the contemporary pursuit of Catholic Christianity on the classic historical account of the Mercersburg Theology, James Hastings Nichols's *Romanticism in American Theology: Nevin and Schaff at Mercersburg* (1961). Based on extensive research, to which subsequent scholars remain indebted, this work was a welcome contribution to American religious and intellectual history. Nichols linked Mercersburg to “that traditionalist, ‘churchly,’ sacramental movement which swept across much of Christendom in the second generation of the nineteenth century,” and he excelled at placing Nevin and, particularly, Schaff in this context.

The primary shared complaint in overwhelmingly positive reviews of the book focused on Nichols’s use of “Romanticism” to locate the Mercersburg Theology in these nineteenth-century cultural and intellectual currents. Nichols did not provide a formal definition of this key term, which would have made possible an explication of what, or how much, the Mercersburg professors (and, in particular, their emphasis on the church question) had in common with other Romantics. Though directed toward a seemingly minor aspect of the work, there was more at stake in these demurrals than an antiquarian quibble about taxonomy.

Generally speaking, to identify the Mercersburg Theology with nineteenth-century Romanticism in the mid-twentieth century was not to pay it a complement.

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47 They also consulted Penzel, “Philip Schaff: A Centennial Appraisal,” citing Penzel’s characterization of the Mercersburg Theology as, at least in Schaff’s case, “a belated stage of rebellion” (213).
Rather, it was to summon up various tendencies—including cultural nostalgia and sloppy, sentimental thinking—many of which were now widely considered irredeemably tainted by association with fascism and best left behind. However, despite the title, in Nichols’s lightly worn assessment the Mercersburg Theology appears as a rather avant-garde addition to the antebellum theological milieu. Though mostly unappreciated and even reviled in its time, it anticipated mainstream twentieth-century ecumenism and did much to help American theology out of provincial isolation and into historical consciousness.50

The decades following Nichols’s standard-setting historical treatment saw limited but steady interest in Nevin and the Mercersburg Theology. Some of these studies focused on particular aspects of the Mercersburg Theology and/or Nevin’s views on particular theological subjects,51 or on specific questions about the church (e.g., liturgical reform and sacramental theology).52 Still others attempted, in different ways, to grasp the philosophical-theological outlook of Nevin and/or “Mercersburg” as a coherent whole in order to identify its intellectual sources more precisely and to highlight its creative and

50 E.g., “[Nevin and Schaff] made a major contribution to breaking down American intellectual provincialism and to opening communication with the live currents of European theology. In the process they reopened many questions which most Americans supposed permanently settled, and they took seriously the thinking of traditions like European Lutheranism and Roman Catholicism, which most American theologians did not even bother to read” (4); and, “[T]he agenda of the twentieth century ecumenical movement . . . reads like the heads of the Mercersburg controversy. Christ and the church, tradition and traditions, ministry and sacraments, ways of worship, the nature of church unity—on all these contemporary themes . . . Nevin and Schaff speak with startling actuality” (310).


By 1995, enough scholars had done historical, theological, and philosophical work on Nevin to merit a collection of essays investigating various aspects of his life and thought. Many of the contributions were condensed presentations of larger studies (e.g., dissertations). One of the great challenges of interpreting the Mercersburg Theology is to respect its integrity as a coherent body of theological ideas, while simultaneously keeping in view the “questions of practical Christianity” that Nevin insisted were its primary impetus. Thus, James Bratt’s attempt to place Nevin in the context of the “antebellum culture wars” was an important contribution to this volume, as was Richard Wentz’s essay on “Nevin and American Nationalism,” as both brought forward underdeveloped aspects of Nichols’s historical presentation of Mercersburg.\footnote{James D. Bratt, “Nevin and the Antebellum Culture Wars,” in \textit{Reformed Confessionalism in Nineteenth-Century America}, ed. Hamstra and Griffioen (1995): 1-22.}

In 1997, Wentz published what he called a “postmodern portrait” of Nevin’s ideas, a description rooted in Wentz’s determined opposition to the notion that Nevin should be labeled and dismissed as a reactionary Romantic. By attending to the “public and dialectical character of Nevin’s thought,” Wentz endeavored to show that Nevin was anything but “a misfit unable to find a home in the American intellectual landscape and
without resource to become an expatriate." Rather, Nevin was a thoroughly *American* theologian, who brought "the insights of historical perspective and an incarnational theology to the circumstances of American religious life."\textsuperscript{55} Wentz’s study was a labor of love, as he grew up in the Mercersburg tradition, graduated from Lancaster Seminary and even taught at Mercersburg Academy, on the same grounds once roaming by Nevin and Schaff. No doubt for this reason, his analysis is frequently insightful as well as somewhat idiosyncratic.\textsuperscript{56}

A number of more recently published works have examined Nevin and Mercersburg in ways that give more attention to the church question than their predecessors. Like Wentz, but for different reasons, these authors are all conscious of encountering Nevin from a very different standpoint than that of a mid-twentieth century historiographical (or ecclesiological) consensus. The first of these to note is D. G. Hart’s *John Williamson Nevin: High Church Calvinist* (2007).\textsuperscript{57} In this new biography, Hart laments that, despite his generally evenhanded treatment, Nichols’s ultimate loyalty to a more theologically liberal ecumenism led him to dismiss Mercersburg’s Reformed critics (like Charles Hodge) as benighted defenders of a discredited orthodoxy best left behind—and in a way that exaggerates Nevin’s distance from confessional traditionalists. To remedy this, Hart presents a historical case for Nevin as a theological conservative who believed himself to be working within the Reformed tradition, even if he tested its boundaries.

\textsuperscript{56} Wentz’s rather abstract thesis is that, "[t]he life of John Williamson Nevin is shaped in response to the circumstances of American life and thought, that it represents an ever-expanding awareness that horizons are never steeled boundaries, that the self is discerned as it is opened to symbols that transmit a reality ever greater than our ability to comprehend" (12-13).
Hart’s primary concern, however, is to show why “John Williamson Nevin should matter to American Presbyterians and Reformed Christians more than he does.”\(^{58}\) In Hart’s judgment, Nevin was a prophet who rightly saw that the “critical period” for American Protestantism was not—as so many would have it—the late nineteenth century, as the task of meeting the challenge of modern thought divided the major Protestant denominations. Rather, he contends, Nevin matters because his fundamental critique of his Protestant contemporaries shows that the truly fateful hour occurred during the early nineteenth century, as American Protestants generally traded their inheritance of churchly, sacramental faith for a mess of revivalistic pottage.\(^{59}\) Thus, the historiographical argument with Nichols matters for Hart because he wants his fellow Reformed confessionalists to recognize in Nevin one of their own (or, at least, not one of “them”—i.e., a mainline ecumenist), so that Nevin’s pleas might yet gain a new hearing.\(^{60}\)

In *The Mercersburg Theology and the Quest for Reformed Catholicity* (2009), W. Bradford Littlejohn agrees with Hart’s portrayal of Nevin as a Reformed theologian who sought theological renewal by returning to the tradition’s own sources, and he applauds Hart’s attempt to enlist Nevin in a contemporary campaign for churchly and confessional Presbyterianism. However, Littlejohn faults Hart for downplaying just how much Nevin

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\(^{58}\) Ibid., 17.


\(^{60}\) Hart’s Nevin needs to be read in light of his recent lament over the assimilation of traditional Protestants into the confessionally flabby and ecclesiually amorphous phenomenon of “evangelicalism.” See D. G. Hart, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004). By “evangelicalism” Hart does not intend primarily to refer to the broadly “evangelical” Protestantism that emerged to prominence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (as defined, for example, by David Bebbington’s four categories [see Chapter I]), but, rather, to the coalition of conservative Protestants that emerged after World War II and sought to distinguish itself from both the institutions of the Protestant “mainline” as well as (isolationist, acerbic) “fundamentalism.”
wanted to be truly “catholic” as well as Reformed. He attempts to remedy this with a series of prima facie comparisons showing analogous emphases in Nevin’s Christological and Incarnational theology and Anglo-Catholicism, recent Orthodox writings (particularly on *theosis*), and the twentieth-century Roman Catholic *nouvelle théologie* (especially the work of Henri de Lubac). As a result, Littlejohn makes a compelling case for Nevin’s (and “Mercersburg’s”) inclusion in a notable and substantial theological convergence across historically divided traditions made possible by a return to shared patristic sources.  

Finally, and most recently, Adam Borneman’s *Church, Sacrament, and American Democracy* strives to highlight Nevin’s expansive sense of all that the church question entailed by demonstrating “the coherence of Nevin’s sociopolitical thought with his broader theological project.” Borneman supplements other accounts of Nevin’s “theology of incarnation” by drawing on a wider range of (often less explicitly doctrinal) texts and by stressing Nevin’s philosophical-theological understanding of “humanity and history.” Like Littlejohn, he attempts to demonstrate Nevin’s profound reach, contemporary relevance, and ecumenical resonance and to establish a family resemblance of sorts between Nevin’s theo-political reflections and a group of diverse thinkers (Vladimir Solovyov, the neo-Reformed school of Abraham Kuyper and his followers, and John Milbank’s “Radical Orthodoxy”) on the shape of a Christian understanding of human sociality.

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In his earlier attempt to understand Nevin’s thought in its social and political context, James Bratt argued that Nevin’s Mercersburg writings could be understood as the quietistic retreat from public engagement of a border-state moderate caught in the crossfire of the antebellum era’s culture wars. Borneman acknowledges his indebtedness to Bratt’s work, but one of his goals is to challenge Bratt’s reading by arguing that Nevin’s turn to high-churchly theology in the 1840s was not a despair-filled escape from the dilemmas of American culture and society, but was, rather, an intentional, thoroughly theological response to them.63

Conclusion

As Nichols concluded in the introduction to his edited anthology of Mercersburg writings:

It is true that Mercersburg constituted a chapter in the history of philosophical idealism in America which has not been adequately evaluated as compared with the New England transcendentalists and the Coleridgeans. But the most distinctive aspects of the thought of Nevin and Schaff were neither their philosophical views per se, nor their ties with the mediating theologians, nor their new sense of history—although the last in particular deserves further consideration. What chiefly identified both Nevin and Schaff, in their own view and in that of their contemporaries, was their interpretation of the Church.64

This assessment is in accord with the reading of the Mercersburg Theology presented above. Yet a primary purpose of this chapter has been to press the point that Nevin and Schaff did not have an interpretation of the Church that could be separated from their convictions about “history” and particular judgments about their own place in history. That is to say, though attempts to distill a coherent and consistent “Mercersburg Theology” have their place and purpose, one cannot elide the internal tensions and

63 Ibid., 9-10.
64 Nichols, introduction to The Mercersburg Theology (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007 [1966], 10.
problematic historical denouement of the Mercersburg movement when the object is to examine Nevin’s pursuit of the church question as a paradigm of the “Catholic tendency in American Protestantism.”

Though mindful of the importance of systematic coherence and conceptual precision, in the following chapters these goals will be subordinated to the task of tracing the ways in which Nevin's views changed over time, using Nevin’s formal description of the Mercersburg Theology as a guide. Other distinguishing features of this study are my placement of Nevin’s “dizziness” at the heart of the argument and, because of this, the extended attention given to Nevin’s encounter with Orestes Brownson. Most studies of the Mercersburg Theology make some mention of their debate, but none emphasize the extent to which Brownson had himself been asking the church question for years, and in ways remarkably similar to Nevin. Since most all of those who write about Nevin are at least somewhat sympathetic to his views, as well as Protestant, few have dwelt at length on the fact that Nevin’s critics may have been right in their claims that Nevin would ultimately prove an unreliable ally in the defense of Protestantism itself.

The presentation that follows brings historical depth to what is ultimately a theological inquiry. As we have seen, the church question was a live or existential question, rather than a purely disinterested inquiry into the essential being of the church. It entailed practical reasoning about what a church must be, here and now, in order to be, theologically speaking, the Church. Therefore, evaluation of Nevin's theological legacy needs to assess his ongoing discernment of the signs of his times, in light of a responsible—though by no means comprehensive—description of those times. As we
begin this account of the Mercersburg Theology, and its crisis of concreteness, we now turn to that task.
CHAPTER III:
THE MAKING OF A BORDER-STATE THEOLOGIAN

In an essay in the volume, *Reformed Theology in America*, Mark Noll claims that, that nineteenth-century Americans who adopted theological habits at variance with the Protestant mainstream—“like the Mercersburg Theology of J. W. Nevin”—were “close to nullities in their own day.”¹ Indeed, it is certainly true that the Mercersburg Theology did not have a substantial influence upon the major currents of nineteenth-century American Protestantism. The fact that Nevin felt it necessary, at the outset of his formal description written in the 1860s, to establish that the Mercersburg Theology was not the product of aloof speculation shows that he was aware of its odd character yet still stung by the lack of response to what he hoped would be a word in due season.

It is also safe to assume that there is proportionately more interest in Nevin’s theological claims today than there was in his own time. Noll is right that, in their treatments of the nineteenth century, classic surveys of American religious history have generally devoted disproportionate coverage to marginal movements and have, in the process, obscured the degree to which certain distinctively American intellectual conventions held sway. This is likely because historians have preferred to focus on forerunners of later trends, and because intellectual historians in particular have happened

to find other subjects (most notably, the New England Transcendentalists) more interesting or compelling than the popular Protestantism that came to dominate public life in the early United States.

While Noll’s critical remark about American religious historiography certainly has merit, it is also the case that we often come to know what was most characteristic of the mainstream religious culture of an era by studying its critics or outliers. In keeping with Nevin’s description, the next two chapters examine the “active interest in practical Christianity” and the “questions of religious life” he claimed were the basis for the Mercersburg Theology. In the process, I will portray John W. Nevin as an “eccentric” nineteenth-century American Protestant. This label has a dual significance.

First, as we have already noted, Nevin became an eccentric American in its colloquial sense of “different” or “peculiar.” Accounting for Nevin’s eccentricity in this sense is the primary focus of this chapter, which consists of a biographical sketch covering the first half of Nevin’s life, through his arrival in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania in 1840. Second, though it was not itself his term, “eccentricity” says something important about the shape of the Mercersburg Theology itself.

The first sense of eccentricity highlights a formal notion of difference from an abstract norm and typically connotes a negative judgment. In the second sense, the “out of,” or “apart from,” of ec-centricity denotes a preliminary or penultimate differentiation that makes possible a proper relation with one’s true center. In the first, to be eccentric is to be more or less deviant (and, most often, problematically so). In the second, the opposite is true: one should want to be deviant in such a manner, if “eccentric” serves as adequate shorthand for existence that is—to adapt biblical and traditional phrases from
the classic theological tradition—neither curved in on itself, nor conformed to “the world” (understood on its own terms), but, rather, finds its center “in Christ.”

We will have need and opportunity to return to this theme and to explore tensions between these two forms of eccentricity both during and after a detailed look at the forging of Nevin’s convictions in the context of the early American republic. Nevin’s relative eccentricity deserves mention here at the outset because, as we turn now to an overview of his early career, one of the notable features of his life is his starting location at or near the ostensible center of American life.

A Product of the Center

John Williamson Nevin was born in 1803, the oldest of John and Martha (McCracken) Nevin’s nine children. His life began on a farm near Shippensburg, Pennsylvania, and he died in 1886 near Lancaster, not far from his birthplace. His mother descended from the first Europeans to settle the Cumberland Valley a century earlier. On his father’s side, his great uncle and namesake, Captain John Williamson, was a wealthy trader residing in Charleston, South Carolina. Another uncle, Hugh Williamson, represented North Carolina in the Continental Congress, served as a doctor in the Revolutionary war, and was a delegate to the U.S. Constitutional Convention.

In a cultural (if not strictly geographical) sense, we can locate Nevin near the latitudinal center of the young nation. He spent all but a few of his years just slightly north of the fabled Mason-Dixon line, in a former “middle colony” whose citizens were often quick to distinguish themselves from both Yankees and Southerners. By mid-century, such a middle ground became literally untenable. In 1862, Confederate troops
marched through the Mercersburg region, and the seminary was used as a hospital after the battle of Gettysburg.²

There are also longitudinal reasons for locating Nevin near the American center. He was born and spent most of his life in a context of settled agrarian life. Again, it would be literally false to describe Nevin as a midwesterner. Yet enduring American archetypes inherited from the nineteenth century associate the “East” with urban decadence and the “West” with the near-savage conditions of the frontier. Thus, Nevin can be fairly described as a product of the self-styled American heartland.³

Considered from these perspectives, Nevin was a product of the American center in the sense of middle or mean. He can also be located near the center in the contested, explicitly political sense. Family ties, particularly his well-to-do and influential great-uncles, gave him access to substantial economic and social capital in the young American republic. Nevin’s ethnic and religious heritage gave him access to concentrated power and privilege. As he described his upbringing in his 1870 memoir:

> Being of what is called Scotch-Irish extraction, I was by birth and blood also, a Presbyterian; and as my parents were both conscientious and exemplary professors of religion, I was, as a matter of course, carefully brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, according to the Presbyterian faith as it then stood.⁴

Nevin here highlights the particularity of his ethnic and denominational origins. However, as a Reformed Protestant of British stock, he had the kind of credentials that would establish him in the eyes of xenophobic Americans as an authentic “native.” His

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² Nichols, *Romanticism*, 308.
³ Nevin considered it important that he was raised on a farm, “in the midst of a people of simple and plain manners . . . . I became early familiar also, with the scenes and employments of country life; being put myself in fact to all sorts of farm work, just as soon and as far as I was found to have any power of being useful in that way” (John W. Nevin, *My Own Life: The Earlier Years* [Lancaster, PA: Papers of the Eastern Chapter, Historical Society of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, 1964 (1870), 5. Originally published in the Reformed Church Messenger from March 2 - June 22, 1870).
⁴ Ibid., 2.
Scotch-Irish Presbyterians were the near cousins of the English Puritans who had assumed moral and theological leadership of the English-speaking “new world” for nearly two centuries. By “birth and blood,” then, Nevin was associated with a community that had reason to include themselves among the true American insiders, the bearers of the nation’s destiny.

New Centers of Gravity

With his reference to being raised in the Presbyterian faith “as it then stood,” Nevin implied that the Presbyterianism into which he was born at the turn of the nineteenth century had undergone substantial change. He claimed that the religion of his upbringing had an unmistakably “sacramental” and “educational” character. In short, established practices reinforced the assumption that the Christian life is centered in church membership, which included the profession of a common faith and celebration of common worship. Pastors made periodic home visits to examine members’ grasp of Reformed doctrine, as framed in texts like the (Westminster) “Shorter” Catechism and the “Mother’s” Catechism. These Presbyterians celebrated the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper infrequently but with great solemnity. During four-day “communion seasons,” congregations would gather for a preparatory fast and time of confession which culminated in observance of the rite and a subsequent feast.

In the same year Nevin was born, one of the most famous religious revivals to occur in the United States took place near what was then the Western frontier. On an

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5 Cf., “. . . the old Presbyterian faith, into which I was born, was based throughout on the idea of covenant family religion, church membership by God's holy act in baptism, and following this a regular catechetical training of the young, with direct reference to their coming to the Lord's table” (ibid., 2-3.)

Eastern Kentucky clearing known as Cane Ridge, a small gathering to celebrate the Lord’s Supper became the epicenter of an explosion of spiritual fervor. Without clerical planning or oversight, attendees (whose numbers grew by the day as word spread rapidly across the countryside) manifested all manner of extraordinary spiritual agonies and ecstasies. Untrained laypeople exhorted their neighbors with boldness reminiscent of the original Pentecost. Once again, as the prophet Joel had foretold, God’s spirit was being “poured out on all flesh.”

It has been traditional in surveys of American religious history to point to Cane Ridge as the inauguration of the “Second Great Awakening”—a widespread upsurge in religious fervor that occurred during the first few decades of the nineteenth century. Nomenclature and periodization are certainly debatable. Nonetheless, we can make the general claim that two processes were simultaneously at work during these years.

On the one hand the young United States was ostensibly “Christianized.” Americans’ religious adherence (as measured by church attendance, among other markers) increased substantially, with upstart denominations like the Baptists and Methodists gaining the most members. On the other, Christianity in the United States was “Americanized.” The evangelization of the new nation occurred as the most numerically successful churches incorporated republican, populist, and entrepreneurial themes into their conceptions of faith and practice. These simultaneous processes brought

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a complex combination of forces to bear on all Americans—not least Nevin’s Scotch-Irish, Pennsylvania Presbyterians.

The young republic was forging a new national culture in the historically novel absence of a legally established religion. Concurrently, an ever-expanding universe of new religious groups appeared on the American scene, most asserting rival claims to represent biblical (and, thus, authentic) Christianity. Historic religious traditions felt pressure to de-center venerable practices or discard them altogether in order to adapt to the new situation. Though it began as something like a traditional communion season, one effect of the spirit of “Cane Ridge” was the disappearance of Eucharistic piety and communion liturgy from the mainstream of American Protestant worship.10

As an illustration of the epochal significance some have claimed for the years in which Nevin came of age, one can hardly do better than to cite W.R. Ward’s statement that the period 1790-1830 represents “the most important single generation in the modern history . . . of the whole Christian world.”11 Modifiers like “epochal” and “most important” beg for analysis: how new was the Christianity that took shape in these years, in what ways was it new, and—most difficult to answer, but impossible to ignore—how should these changes be assessed? These are precisely the kinds of questions that eventually came to define Nevin’s theological work and, indeed, much of his life. He was directly exposed to these winds of change as he left home for college.

10 Cf. Schmidt, Holy Fairs, 60-68.
Nevin was not precisely to the manor born, but he was the recipient of privileges available to few Americans at the time. His father virtually embodied the Jeffersonian ideal of the civic-minded agrarian gentleman. A graduate of the nearby (Presbyterian) Dickinson College, the elder John Nevin was, in the parlance of the day, a “Latin farmer.” This meant that he was able to supplement his son’s training in farm management with basic instruction in classical languages.

With the promise of assistance from influential patrons, it had long been assumed that Nevin’s future lay in one of the learned professions. His wealthy great-uncle Captain John Williamson offered to sponsor his education, and his other famous great-uncle, Hugh Williamson, advised the family to send young John to Union College in Schenectady, New York. So in 1819, at a mere sixteen years old, Nevin made what was then the substantial trip to upstate New York.

As its name implied, Union College was founded in 1793 to be a non-sectarian, though “evangelical” institution of higher learning. The college’s third president, Jonathan Edwards, Jr. (son of the famous philosopher, theologian, and evangelist) was instrumental in devising the 1803 Plan of Union on which Congregationalists and Presbyterians agreed to cooperate in Christianizing the Old Northwest. Union thus represented a more cosmopolitan Christianity than Nevin’s childhood Scotch-Irish Presbyterianism. Among its faculty were Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Dutch Reformed.

When Nevin arrived, Union’s star was in the ascendancy. Many—like his great-uncle—believed Union would soon join institutions like Harvard and Yale in grooming
graduates for service in the halls of power. To an extent, this supposition proved correct. Among Nevin’s classmates were future law and seminary professors, Episcopal bishops, and Abraham Lincoln’s Secretary of State, William Seward.

A central need for the early American republic was the establishment of a public discourse that could mobilize citizens and address matters of the common good. This task was made difficult by the fact that the nation’s most prominent religious traditions professed forms of Protestant theology that stressed the gulf between redeemed Christians and unregenerate sinners, between the Word of God and merely human words. It would require the elision of what had always appeared to be glaring contrasts. On the one hand were the self-evident, universal truths of liberal-democratic political theory on the equality and dignity of human beings and classic republican political theories emphasizing virtue as civic mindedness. On the other were the particular doctrinal claims of Reformed Protestantism on subjects like original sin and the necessity of grace for the acquisition of true virtue.¹²

During Nevin’s years at Union, Francis Wayland served as a senior tutor. Wayland eventually moved on to, among other posts, prominent Baptist pastorates in Boston and Providence, Rhode Island and the presidency of Brown University. His Elements of Moral Science (1835) is an excellent illustration of the public philosophy that undergirded what Noll has called the antebellum “evangelical synthesis” of republicanism, common-sense philosophy (more specifically, in this case, moral

¹² Again, one can illustrate the uniquely American nature of this synthesis anecdotally by noting how no less an advocate of revival and classic “evangelical” piety than John Wesley, was convinced — to the utter chagrin of American Methodists — that the spirits of democracy and of Christianity were diametrically opposed. See, e.g., the quotation from Wesley which serves as the epigraph for Part II (“Synthesis”) of Noll, America’s God, 51.
intuitionism), and Biblicist, revivalistic Protestantism.\(^{13}\) According to D.H. Meyer, Wayland’s text—of which 100,000 copies were printed—inaugurated “the textbook era in American ethics.”\(^ {14}\) It became a fixture in the senior capstone courses in moral philosophy required by most of the nation’s colleges—private and public—throughout the nineteenth century.

In Nevin’s day, this public philosophy had not yet been given that kind of authoritative and systematic expression, though most of its features were in place. Union College managed the tensions listed above by keeping particularistic religion (but certainly not morality) formally segregated from academic matters. The college sponsored morning and evening prayers, and students were expected to spend Sundays attending one of the local churches, but these were strictly extracurricular affairs. In later years Nevin lamented that such an arrangement gave the distinct impression that “faith is of no account for learning and science.”\(^ {15}\)

Nevertheless, in its own sphere, “faith” remained a powerful force at Union. In a development that might seem surprising to later Americans, Nevin returned to Pennsylvania after college with more than a degree. He also “got religion.”

In 1819-20, evangelist Asahel Nettleton visited the Schenectady area to coordinate a series of revivals. In the terminology of the preceding century, Nettleton was an anti-formalist “new light” evangelical, keenly attuned to the dangers of allowing

\(^{13}\) Noll, *America's God*, 9-11.


\(^ {15}\) Nevin, *My Own Life*, 8.
outward religious observance to eclipse the imperative for personal regeneration. He stood proudly in the tradition of Jonathan Edwards, claiming to be a “consistent Calvinist” who believed that, while God allows and has recently blessed certain means to accomplish revival (e.g., fervent preaching, hymn singing, protracted prayer meetings, personal testimonies), conversion itself remains an ultimately mysterious work of the Holy Spirit. It is neither a matter of the sinner’s autonomous will nor the direct product of any particular means.

The spiritual fervor sparked by Nettleton’s meetings spread quickly to the Union campus. Though the college was not a formal sponsor, attendance was encouraged. Earnest students who had already become awakened Christians began exhorting their peers to examine their own spiritual states with fear and trembling. After a period of struggle, Nevin testified to a heartfelt conviction of sin and an experience of gracious pardon, which was eagerly confirmed as genuine by his peers.

In his memoirs, Nevin said little more about his years at Union. He came to believe that he was sent away to college at too young an age—a mistake he believed caused him to be a rather timid, though capable, undergraduate. He graduated with honors in 1821 and returned home, a newly regenerate Christian with the choice of his life’s vocation pressing upon him.

Soon afterwards, Nevin was stricken with “dyspepsia,” an ailment that rendered him infirm for a few years and would afflict him intermittently the rest of his life. His physical ailments, coming soon after a heightened focus on his religious affections, activated or exacerbated a melancholic tendency. \(^\text{16}\) Much later, when recalling his

\(^{16}\) According to Nevin, during the whole of 1821 “my whole constitution was . . . dyspeptic in body and mind” (ibid., 11).
collegiate awakening, he referred to the “miserable obstetricians” who assisted with his experience of the new birth:

I, along with others, came into their hands in anxious meetings, and underwent the torture of their mechanical counsel and talk. One after another, however, the anxious obtained "hope;" each new case, as it were, stimulating another, and finally among the last, I struggled into something of the sort myself; a feeble trembling sense of comfort—which my spiritual advisers, then, had no difficulty in accepting as all that the case required. In this way I was converted, and brought into the Church—as if I had been altogether out of it before—about the close of the seventeenth year of my age. My conversion was not fully up to my own idea, at the time, of what such a change should be; but it was as earnest and thorough, no doubt, as that of any of my fellow-converts.17

Alongside this sarcastic (yet certainly sincere) critique Nevin admitted that the revival nevertheless represented a “momentous passage in my life . . . a true awakening and decision in the great concern of personal experimental religion.”

It now seemed clear to family and neighbors that Nevin was particularly suited for the ordained ministry. Yet he was hesitant. By 1823, however, he had sufficiently set these doubts aside to enroll in Princeton Theological Seminary.

Princeton and the Uneasy Center

When Nevin arrived in Princeton, the seminary was in its infancy, having been established a little more than a decade earlier alongside the College of New Jersey. It was already well on its way to being seen as the center for learned exposition of traditional Reformed doctrine in the United States. Archibald Alexander, the seminary’s first president and a former pastor, personified the intellectual and spiritual gravitas the institution sought to convey. Alumnus Charles Hodge, who would become the most erudite spokesman for conservative Protestantism in nineteenth century America, had just joined the faculty.

17 Ibid., 9-10.
Though he would later diverge from the Princeton line at key points, Nevin recalled his seminary days as among the happiest of his life. There, he discovered and honed his abilities in a setting that encouraged both earnest faith and serious reflection. He became the seminary’s best Hebrew student and in 1826 was asked to teach courses while Hodge was on a European sabbatical.

Despite this outward success, Nevin’s internal struggles continued. He later came to see a reflection of his personal spiritual disquiet in the unresolved tensions he experienced at Princeton Seminary. To this point, it is worthwhile to describe the way in which Princeton Seminary inhabited a particular form of what Paul Conkin called, in his history of Reformed Protestantism in antebellum America, the “uneasy center.”

If Union College segregated “faith” from “learning,” while honoring both, Princeton Seminary strove mightily to hold together the positive claims of revealed religion and heartfelt personal piety.

Theology

The Princetonians assumed the role of the guardians of traditional Calvinism in America—a legacy passed down symbolically from New England Puritanism through Jonathan Edwards, who accepted a request to serve as President of the College of New Jersey, but died shortly after taking office in 1758. Hodge famously declared that he had no knowledge of any new ideas that had been taught at the seminary during his half-century tenure. When Nevin arrived, the primary theology text was the *Institutio theologiae elencticae* of seventeenth-century Protestant scholastic Francis Turretin.

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19 “Whether it be a ground of reproach or of approbation, it is believed to be true, that an original idea is not to be found on the pages of the *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* from the beginning.
The seminary generally adopted the inductive methodology and Common Sense epistemology of the moderate, Scottish enlightenment brought to Princeton by the College of New Jersey’s second President, John Witherspoon. In an illustration eagerly seized upon by later historians, Hodge compared theological method with the work of the (“Baconian”) natural scientist. As the physical world is to the scientific investigator, so the Bible is to the theologian: a “storehouse of facts” to be uncovered, clarified, and systematized. As we have seen, common sense philosophy seemed ideally, if not providentially, suited for the early United States. Here was a philosophical-theological method, free from formal reliance on tradition and its authoritative/authoritarian custodians and interpreters.

In the 1820s, Princeton was marshaling its forces in opposition to the “New Divinity” emanating from New England, which was reinterpreting traditional Calvinism in light of self-evidently universal moral intuitions. The eventual result was a more “democratic,” anthropocentric theology in which—to oversimplify gradual and highly nuanced developments—classically Reformed views of a God whose irresistible grace required the inscrutable mystery of predestination were replaced by a theology in which

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20 “The true method of theology is, therefore, the inductive, which assumes that the Bible contains all the facts or truths which form the contents of theology, just as the facts of nature are the contents of the natural sciences. It is also assumed that the relation of these biblical facts to each other, the principles involved in them, the laws which determine them, are in the facts themselves and are to be deduced from the facts of nature. In neither case are the principles derived from the mind and imposed upon the facts, but equally in both departments, the principles or laws are deduced from the facts and recognized by the mind.” Hodge, Intro to Systematic Theology (1871). Cited in Noll, Princeton Theology, 130.

21 For a classic treatment of this material, see Henry F. May, The Enlightenment in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

22 Hodge certainly considered the Reformed confessions (and the subjectively experienced guidance of the Holy Spirit) to be indispensable aids for biblical exegesis. That said, since the use of these supplementary guides did not require formal acknowledgment of authoritative social mediation in the hermeneutical process, they remained compatible with a qualified understanding of “common sense.”
God’s wise moral government of the universe demanded repentance from sinners who could truly repent of their own accord.23

During Nevin’s time there as a student, the Princetonians began to conclude that the practical effects of the New Divinity appeared, and were epitomized, in the work of Charles G. Finney, the lawyer-turned-evangelist whose innovative revival techniques took the growing settlements of upstate New York by storm in the mid-to-late 1820s. Making a direct comparison between converting sinners and swaying a jury, Finney controversially and systematically employed a series of “new measures” calculated to ensure conversions. Prominent among these was the introduction of the “anxious bench,” in which listeners were urged to come forward to a special seating section where prayers and exhortations would be offered on their behalf toward the end of their conversion.24 To Princeton, Finney brazenly reduced the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit in converting the human heart to a set of immanent techniques within human control.25

Piety

As a primary intellectual source of the Protestant fundamentalism that emerged out of theological controversies in the early twentieth century, the Princeton Theology is often associated with a cold (and perhaps obscurantist) rationalism. However, their opposition to Finney and his emulators should not obscure the fact that men like Alexander and Hodge supported the cause of revivals more generally. Although the enthusiasm of subjective, “heart religion” could be abused, this was in their view no

23 See, e.g., Noll’s discussion of N.W. Taylor in America’s God, 277-281.
24 Finney did not invent most of the new measures (including the anxious bench, which was first employed by Methodists) but he popularized and perfected their use.
reason for denigrating “experimental faith” in favor of religious formalism and practically sterile orthodoxy.

Nevin later recalled the way in which the faculty modeled and regularly exhorted seminarians to engage in rigorous self-examination—a practice that burdened his sensitive conscience:

Embarrassments, fears and doubts, with regard to my personal religion, attended me, more or less, all the time . . . . There was much in the institution to promote earnest concern of this sort. Dr. Alexander’s searching and awakening casuistry, especially in our Sunday afternoon conferences, were of a character not easy to be forgotten. It was by no means uncommon for students to go away from these meetings, in a state of spiritual discouragement bordering on despair. And these, of course, were generally of the more serious and earnest class.\(^{26}\)

Alexander certainly did not intend to leave students in such a state. Agitated conferees like Nevin were urged to take solace—but not, ultimately, complacent comfort—in the objective assurances of biblical truth.

Lefferts Loetscher’s study of the early Princeton Seminary supports the later Nevin’s conclusion that the faith he encountered there had a constitutionally dualistic character:

Alexander . . . continued to speak and write about piety and learning as two quite separate experiences which must be brought together, instead of seeking to integrate them under some such single rubric as the knowledge of God . . . [This] love of dualism was reflected in his sharp contrast between objective truth (in this case, revelation) and subjective truth (in this case, Christian experience).\(^{27}\)

For his part, Hodge observed approvingly that, “it is no uncommon thing to find men having two theologies—one of the intellect, and another of the heart. The one may find expression in creeds and systems of divinity, the other in their prayers and hymns.” Yet

\(^{26}\) Nevin, My Own Life, 21.
his claim that these theologies could coexist harmoniously does not explain how that might occur, and on terms compatible with Reformed doctrine.  

This sketch of the milieu in which Nevin received his formal theological training provides a window into how his seminary negotiated the relations between head and heart, past and present, dogma and experience. If Princeton was decidedly theologically conservative, its simultaneous embrace of the moderate Enlightenment and support for “heart religion” made it a peculiarly American and nineteenth-century form of doctrinal traditionalism. Noll memorably describes the classic Princeton Theology as “a story of how a group of theologians so effectively joined [biblicism], Calvinistic confessionalism and nineteenth-century intellectual fashions that they were criticized by contemporaries for being unreasonably Reformed and by succeeding generations for being hopelessly Victorian.”

From Princeton to Pittsburgh

When Hodge returned from his sabbatical in 1828, Nevin’s temporary reprieve from vocational anxiety ended. Still wrestling with uncertainty about his call to the pastorate, he was given another unexpected and welcome opportunity when a new Presbyterian seminary in Pittsburgh invited him to join its faculty. He eagerly accepted the offer and returned home.

In 1830, Nevin was appointed professor of Biblical Literature at the Western Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh. During the interim, the local Presbytery licensed

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28 “It would be safe for a man to admit into his theology nothing which is not sustained by the devotional writings of true Christians of every denomination. It would be easy to construct from such writings received and sanctioned by Romanists, Lutherans, Reformed, and Remonstrants [i.e., Arminians], a system of Pauline or Augustinian theology such as would satisfy any intelligent and devout Calvinist in the world.” Hodge, Introduction to Systematic Theology (1871) cited in Noll, Princeton Theology, 130.

29 Noll, introduction to Princeton Theology, 36.

30 Western Seminary is now Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, affiliated with the Presbyterian
him to preach and he began to fill vacant pulpits in the area each Sunday. On his father’s advice, he trained himself to preach without manuscript and he reports that his weighty messages, delivered in what he described as a “John the Baptist style” were favorably received.31

When describing his earlier interlude at home before leaving for seminary, Nevin observed that the student ministers from Princeton who appeared in area congregations exuded a certain sanctimonious progressivism designed to contrast with the “old-fogeyism” of the traditional ministers and congregants. He now identified himself with “that awakened younger class in the congregation, who saw for the most part a state of dead formality only in its church services, and found it somewhat difficult to believe that the older sort of people generally had any religion at all.”32 Doubts about his ministerial vocation and spiritual condition that had lingered since his conversion experience at Union College now appeared to be resolved.

He was now an eager Princeton graduate himself, with a progressive sanctimoniousness of his own. James Hastings Nichols described Nevin’s decade in Pittsburgh as his “Puritan career.”33 As a public figure in the growing city of Pittsburgh, Nevin was in many respects a zealous crusader on behalf of the network of trans-denominational voluntary associations that many historians have described as the (evangelical) “united front” or, cleverly, the “benevolent empire.”34 However, this was

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31 Nevin’s father died unexpectedly just before he moved west, giving Nevin responsibility for an estate as well as means to support his family through the seminary’s intermittent funding crises. (In 1835, he married Martha Jenkins, whose father owned a prosperous Lancaster County iron works).
32 Nevin, My Own Life, 14.
33 Nichols, Romanticism, chapter 1 (title).
34 On “united front” see Ahlstrom, Religious History of the American People, 387ff. For the “benevolent empire,” see Robert T. Handy, A Christian America; Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).
also a time in which he continued to gather reasons that would lead him to conclude that
the American, Christian center as presently constituted could not hold.

* A Transitional Decade in Turbulent Times

In Pittsburgh Nevin participated in a milieu that downplayed ecclesiastical
differences in order to ensure the largest possible cooperation in the causes of evangelism
and social reform. He called for the establishment and strict enforcement of Sabbath
laws, and opposed the theater and other purported threats to public morals. He was also
an outspoken advocate of temperance. This stance, inherited from his father, was
reinforced at Union College, where President Eliaphet Nott was a famous teetotaler.\textsuperscript{35}

Nevin took a leading role in the “Young Men’s Society of Pittsburg and
Vicinity”—essentially, an early YMCA—and edited its publication, *The Friend*, for
several years. In the inaugural issue of *The Friend*, the idealistic Nevin distinguished
between the husk of “controversial opinions” and the kernel of evangelical morality and
truth that has “never yet been made the scene of Christian controversy at all.” He called
all citizens of goodwill—“among whom the fundamental principles of patriotism and
piety are not disowned”—to leave behind doctrinal quibbles and unite on the higher plane
of practical Christian living.\textsuperscript{36}

On the most controversial issue of the era, Nevin was consistently anti-slavery, a
position he had also inherited from his father. He never joined an anti-slavery society and
distanced himself from radical abolitionists. But he was still labeled “the most dangerous

\textsuperscript{35} Nevin was an advocate for a joint effort to put a Bible in the hands of every person on earth by
the end of the century (Nichols, *Romanticism*, 22. Citing *The Friend* [June 12, 1834]). Nevin was also, for a
time, editor of the *Temperance Register*.

\textsuperscript{36} Nevin, *My Own Life*, 82-83. See also Nichols, *Romanticism*, 22-25.
man in Pittsburgh” by at least one leading citizen, simply for calling slavery an unambiguous evil.

For a time he leaned toward colonization as a solution to the slavery problem, but he did not commit *The Friend* to any position. In 1835, he was pressured into resigning his editorial post after supporting the rebels who left Lane (Presbyterian) Seminary in Cincinnati in protest of administrative attempts to silence their anti-slavery activism. In his parting address to readers, Nevin announced that he, too, was an abolitionist and now saw no use for half-measures like colonization.37

During these years Nevin mediated within himself many of the tensions that existed within American Presbyterianism. Theologically, he remained orthodox in the Princetonian sense, warning against the “Pelagian” errors of the “new divinity” and Yale’s Taylor. He attended a service conducted by the “Finneyite” revivalist James Gallagher, and pronounced the evangelist to be little more than a manipulative charlatan.38

His social stances therefore put him in a difficult position. The opponents of Finney and Taylor, concentrated in the South and mid-Atlantic, were almost equally opposed to abolitionism as “Taylorism.” In 1837, Presbyterians split into “Old School” and “New School” camps, roughly along the geographic lines just described. Commanding a majority of the General Assembly, the Old School excised all churches and judicial regions that had become part of the Presbyterian fold under the 1803 Plan of Union with the Congregationalists.

37 “Slavery is a sin as it exists in this country, and as such ought at once to be abolished. There is no excuse for its being continued a single day. The whole nation is involved in the guilt of it, so long as public sentiment acquiesces in it as a necessary evil” (Nevin, “The Grand Heresy,” *The Friend* 24 [February 5, 1835]). Also quoted by Nevin in *My Own Life*, 92-93.

38 Nevin, *My Own Life*, 126.
The ostensible point of contention was opposition to the theology of one of Taylor’s Presbyterian disciples, Albert Barnes. However, one effect of the schism was to remove areas of sizable abolitionist agitation from their fellowship. Nevin was disturbed by the harsh tenor of the proceedings, believing that what was essentially a local dispute in Philadelphia and New York was unnecessarily dividing the entire church.

His actions in this episode, with regard to seemingly obscure procedural points, are instructive. He first supported Archibald Alexander’s unsuccessful plea to establish three relatively autonomous regional bodies. When that failed, he joined a minority of the Presbytery of Ohio (which included Western Pennsylvania) in refusing to ratify the Old School’s decision. A year later, in an effort to ensure unity, the Ohio Presbytery sought and received unanimous endorsement of an “adhering act,” which asked for all to affirm Old School doctrinal positions without questioning the orthodoxy of those, like Nevin, who had previously been unable to support all the conservatives’ political actions. Even then, Nevin insisted that official records reflect his opposition to the claim that the Old School General Assembly was the “only true and lawful succession of the Presbyterian Church in this country.” Nevin, and three others who joined him, refused to make this constitutional matter “an article of faith for themselves or others.”

Though he knew it made him appear “willfully scrupulous” at the time, Nevin recalled his actions with some pride more than three decades later. In this episode, we see him balancing theological principle and a concern for unity. Or, perhaps better put, he saw ecclesial unity, however strained, as a good to be argued for, rather than the mere absence of controversy. In September 1839, he spoke at length before the literary

39 Ibid., 88-89.
40 Though he knew it made him appear “willfully scrupulous” at the time, Nevin later recalled his
society of Washington College (just outside Pittsburgh) on the nature of “Party Spirit,” and the remedy for its many evils.\textsuperscript{41} In his analysis, party spirit was the sinful distortion of the entirely natural principle of social affinity. When it comes to dominate, he explained, both truth and the common good become casualties of souls fallen under the sway of “unholy passion.” Monomania ensues, and persons and parties surrender themselves to a single idea. Party spirit can affect all areas of life, Nevin warned, including politics and science. At present it had particularly come to dominate religion. Like Saul of Tarsus, well-intentioned believers easily let zealous partisanship lead them into attacking the very purposes of God himself.\textsuperscript{42}

“Party Spirit” was Nevin’s final published public address during his tenure at Western Seminary. Early the next year, he received an unexpected offer to serve the German Reformed Church, which had recently moved its seminary to the village of Mercersburg, not far from his boyhood home. At the time he was technically unemployed, having followed through on an oft-repeated threat to resign if the constituents of Western Seminary did not provide better financial support. He politely declined the offer, however, citing as reasons his ongoing commitment to the school and the Presbyterian Church, as well as the obvious fact that he was not himself German and would surely have a difficult time gaining the confidence of his new constituency. Surely, he asked, there were other, more suitable, candidates who would not be immediately seen as a denominational and cultural outsider?


The seminary’s governing board was convinced that Nevin was exactly who they needed. His credentials would give the institution a boost in intellectual prestige. Moreover, he had grown up in the region and was, despite his demurral, sufficiently familiar with the culture of the Pennsylvania Germans (or “Dutch”—a corruption of *Deutsch*). Finally, they had learned that Nevin had recently taught himself to read German in order to pursue a serious interest in German literature.

A member of the board made an impassioned plea on Nevin’s behalf, in hopes that a unanimous endorsement of his candidacy would convince him of a duty to accept this call. These hopes were fulfilled, and this time Nevin took the job. Circumstances at Western Seminary had not improved, and Nevin had come to see in the invitation to this new position another unanticipated movement of providence. He left Allegheny City to return east in 1840.

*Turning from the Center*

Nevin left Pittsburg with the blessing of Archibald Alexander, who told him to understand his departure from the Presbyterian fold as a transfer from one branch of the Reformed family tree to another. Yet Nevin knew that it was not that simple. This was a community no less “American” than Nevin’s Presbyterians, to be sure, but one whose American story had thus far taken place on the ethnic and cultural margins. He was moving from a growing urban center to the obscurity of an isolated mountain village in order to serve a denomination most Americans did not know existed, many of whose members did not worship in English.

As he introduced himself to his new church, Nevin made clear that he did not believe that his task was to help the German Reformed move to the center so that they
might more easily join in the shared mission of all American Christians. To the contrary, he contended that it was only by cultivating the riches of their distinctive heritage that they could offer a desperately needed service. Though he acknowledged a basic unity among the various national Reformed Churches, he insisted that, “the German Reformed Church ought not to lay aside her distinctive national character and merge herself in a foreign interest.” Rather than assimilate to “the religious systems of England and Scotland on this side of the Atlantic . . . . she must rise within herself, under God, by and from herself.”

Nevin insisted upon the gravity of the task entrusted to him and to the entire German Reformed Church. As an institution established by divine grace, the church outranked the state in its importance and ultimate influence on human affairs. Thus, the pulpit is “of more might by far than the agency of the Senate chamber,” and the character of the German Reformed Church “involves a great deal, not only for the German population itself to which it belongs, but to the American nation generally.”

Therefore, he concluded, “if there ever was a case in which a people were bound to rally round a common cause, as with the spirit of one man, it seems to me that we have it.” What, Nevin asked rhetorically, could be more “auspicious to the interests of truth, of freedom, and human happiness, in this country” than “the general triumph of light and truth through the mighty mass of mind between the Atlantic and the Alleghenies?”

Would it not be to the whole land as life from the dead? Where should we find, in such a case, in these whole United States, a community of the same extent so

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43 Ibid., 113.
44 Ibid., 109.
45 Ibid., 112.
interesting to look upon, or that might be considered more necessary to the religious and political prosperity of the land?\textsuperscript{46}

As a cultural outsider Nevin certainly introduced himself to the German Reformed in a manner calculated to win trust and goodwill. But this was more than flattery. He really believed that his new church had a providentially prepared role to play in saving American Christianity—and the United States—from themselves.

\textit{Taking Stock}

It did not require a tremendous amount of insight to recognize that the nation was in trouble. The Presbyterian schism Nevin had just experienced was the first of several major denominational splits to occur as the United States entered the middle third of the nineteenth-century. Northern and Southern Baptists and Methodists would similarly divide in the mid-1840s. As one historian has concluded, these church schisms “presaged and to some extent provoked” the national crisis that eventually erupted in Civil War.\textsuperscript{47} However, it is harder to see why Nevin believed his new church was in such a strategic position to help.

As D.G. Hart rightly notes, "American Christians so closely associate high church Protestantism with things European that explanations for Nevin's emergence as a proponent of sacramental and liturgical rigor automatically look to his association with the European theology and church life of the German Reformed Church."\textsuperscript{48} As we will see later, this was not exactly the case. If Nevin was expecting to leave American Presbyterian and discover a vibrant enclave of classic, churchly Calvinism at

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 115.
\textsuperscript{48} Hart, \textit{High-Church Calvinist}, 62-63.
Mercersburg, he was sorely disappointed. If the German Reformed Church did become something of an enclave of “high church Calvinism,” it was largely because Nevin served as catalyst, rather than as the mere translator of an already-present vision for his fellow Americans.

In part to underscore the cultural and intellectual distance Nevin travelled by moving to Mercersburg, Nichols described Nevin’s Pittsburgh years as his “Puritan career.” However, to the extent that it reinforces the hasty and incorrect judgment Hart identifies, and implies that Nevin was converted to a radically new theological orientation upon arriving in Mercersburg, that label is misleading. A close reading of Nichols’s actual account could not sustain such a judgment, but the phrase obscures Nevin’s longstanding discomfort with what he would call “modern Puritanism,” as well as his own involvement in it.

Thus far, we have mostly focused on Nevin’s “active interest in practical Christianity” and we have identified some of the experiences that certainly prepared Nevin to conclude that the world he had known could not hold itself together convincingly. In this next section, we will try to get a sense of the “questions of religious life” that informed the Mercersburg Theology. In other words, by the time he arrived in Mercersburg, who was Nevin the theologian? This is a somewhat arbitrary distinction, and not one that Nevin himself would have been entirely happy with. However, a sufficient explanation of Nevin’s opening words in Mercersburg—with its dire political prophecy and his quasi-Messianic hopes for the German Reformed in America—requires that we attend to notable aspects of his intellectual development.
The Shaping of an Eccentric Theologian

Nevin spent the majority of his 1870 memoirs, which conclude at his departure from Pittsburgh, narrating the “inner history” of his early life.⁴⁹ In that account, as we have already seen, he claimed that he had been thrown off balance ever since his revival conversion at Union College. He proved unable to harmonize his sacramental and catechetical upbringing with a system of piety “based throughout on the principle, that regeneration and conversion lay outside of the Church [and] had nothing to do with baptism and Christian education . . . .”⁵⁰

At Princeton, church participation and, particularly, sound doctrine, were held forth as essential counterweights to an intense emphasis on the religious affections. However, according to Nevin, despite all this,

. . . the other unchurchly scheme also exercised over me a strong practical force, which I was not able to withstand. . . . The tide of actual living throughout around us lay all now another way; and all of us, whether we would have it so or not, fell inwardly and experimentally, more or less, under captivity to its power. . . . So it was that I found myself in a sort of strait between these two systems, and knew not how to adjust the one rightly with the other in my religious life. The difficulty was a seriously practical one, and it attended me through all my Princeton years; although my mind, toward the end, began to take in regard to it, more and more, the bent which came to prevail with me fully at a later time.⁵¹

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⁴⁹ Nichols was certainly right to warn against over-reliance on My Own Life (Romanticism, 37). Read as a straightforward account of Nevin’s “inner life” during the 1830s, it almost certainly gives a misleading impression, since Nevin himself admitted that he was primarily engaging in extensive retrospective self-criticism (in fact, Nevin’s own account lends itself to the “Puritan career” interpretation of the 1830s, which later scholars faulted have Nichols for promoting). Yet, it is as important a source as we have for understanding Nevin’s intellectual history. Moreover, in this study we are ultimately interested in the “Mercersburg Theology” Nevin described just a few years before writing My Own Life rather than the “historical Nevin” per se.

⁵⁰ Nevin, My Own Life, 10.

⁵¹ Ibid., 23.
Substantial research has already been devoted to explicating the theological and philosophical inclinations that Nevin had already acquired before arriving in Mercersburg. What follows is a summary of some of the important turns in that story.

*From Common Sense toward Romantic Intuitionism and Idealism*

Nevin described his inner life during his time in Pittsburgh as a growing impatience with the methods he had been taught at Princeton and dutifully passed along. He became familiar with and attracted to new modes of thought that contrasted with the Common Sense philosophy and “scientific” exegesis that dominated American Protestant theology. Like many literate Americans in the 1830s, it was partly Samuel Taylor Coleridge who introduced Nevin to Immanuel Kant’s turn to the subject in philosophy, via Coleridge’s distinction between the reflective, empirical “understanding” and the intuitive “reason” on which its function depends.

Nevin was an instructor of Biblical Theology and his interests were more hermeneutical and devotional than strictly philosophical. Among other works, he read and favorably reviewed Johann Herder’s *Lectures on Hebrew Poetry*, which raised questions about the adequacy of inductive exegesis to grasp the spiritual realities and verities encountered through scripture. As a summary statement, we can simply observe that by reaching out beyond the Common Sense tradition, Nevin was looking for a way to unify the subjective-objective/inner-outer dualism he had inherited. These resources did not necessarily solve the problem, and surely created others, but they seemed to make it

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53 *The Friend* almost certainly took its name from Coleridge. In dueling short essays, Layman and DiPuccio debated the extent of Coleridge’s influence on Nevin in *NMR 17*.  

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possible to demonstrate how “faith” might have something substantial to do with “learning” or “science.”

Nevin was not drawn to more mystical or idealistic notions only through exposure to avant-garde thought. His warning against the dangers of “party spirit” drew upon Plato’s Republic and Phaedo in calling listeners to avoid divisiveness by transcending the mere shadows of the good, true, and beautiful over which they were quibbling. He found both inspiration and precedent for his Platonism in the writings of seventeenth-century Puritan mystics. 54 Many of these writers habitually referred to the Christian life using categories of intrinsic relation like “participation” and “implantation.” All this was a contrast to the much more common Reformed stress on forensic, extrinsic categories for speaking of sin and redemption (e.g., justification, imputation).

It would be misleading to conclude that Nevin simply embraced a turn to the subject or that he had become wholly dissatisfied with the empirical thrust of his training. He mentions taking an interest in natural science during his stay at home after college, studying and collecting specimens from the nearby woods. 55 His first major publication, A Guide to Biblical Antiquities (1827) made a case for becoming as familiar as possible with the historical circumstances of the biblical writers in order to cultivate a sympathetic imagination that could properly hear its message. 56 A deeply ingrained appreciation for

54 Among his influences, Nevin lists Richard Baxter (1615-91), John Flavel (1628-91), John Owen (1616-83), and, in particular, the “deep Platonizing thoughts” of John Howe (1630-1705), the “profound spirituality” of Archbishop Robert Leighton (1611-84), and Henry Scougal (1650-78)—especially Scougal’s “Life of God in the Soul of Man” (My Own Life, 122).
55 Ibid., 16.
56 “We need to be conversant with the mountains, the plains and the streams; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air, the labours of the farmer and the habits of the shepherd; we need to talk, in fancy’s vivid vision, through the streets of Jerusalem; to mingle with the inmates of the Jewish dwelling; to participate in their season of festive joy, and so to sympathize with their sorrow in the day of calamity and bereaving death; we need to go up to the temple, to unite in its worship, to behold its solemn rites, and to admire the beautiful grandeur of its scene” (Nevin, A Summary of Biblical Antiquities [1829-30; reprint
and openness to the stubborn “facts” of reality never left him. It was an account of these facts—in which the spiritual and material, subjective and objective, “faith” and “science” inhabited a single, interconnected world—that he sought.

Historical-Mindedness

Nevin learned German for the primary purpose of reading the works of the church historian Augustus Neander. His encounter, which began with Neander’s *Tertullian*, was an “epochal” event in his intellectual and spiritual life, leading him to characterize the standard church history of his day as woefully inadequate. Though accidental changes of circumstance may have been noted, he had been encouraged to engage the past with purported objective neutrality, while still serving the contemporary ends of enriching devotion or defending orthodoxy. In the process, he was not challenged to acknowledge historical distance or to reflect on the nature and meaning of the historical process itself:

As some travel through foreign countries, seeing them only in an outward, transient manner, through the medium of their home prejudices; and so come back not enlarged at all, but narrowed rather, in their thinking; in like sort too much, I may say, had I also traveled through the eighteen centuries of the Christian era, without after all getting clear of the stand-point of my own time and place so as to see things in any really free way.  

In short, he began to discover the Christian past as a world of thought and piety far removed from contemporary Protestantism, which posed a fundamental challenge to that worldview. To that point, he later claimed,

I believed, of course, in the ‘great apostacy’ [sic]; which was supposed to have started almost immediately after the age of the Apostles; which turned primitive Presbyterianism, first into common Prelacy, and then into the full blown Hierarchy of the fourth century; and which converted the Church itself finally, in the Middle Ages, into the Synagogue of Satan, with the “man of Sin” (Anti-Christ) presiding over it in the person of the Roman Pope. The whole thousand years before the Reformation were, to my mind, a sort of Devil’s millennium,

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57 Nevin, My Own Life, 45.
during which, the powers of darkness had things very much their own way; while the real life of Christianity had been kept up mainly, if not wholly, on the outside of the Church, through such ‘witnesses of the truth’ as the Waldenses, Albigenses, Paulicians, and others, of like outcast character and name, who, it might be presumed, had never been altogether wanting in the Christian world for this purpose.\footnote{Ibid., 46.}

Through Neander, Nevin discovered change over time as a dimension of human existence to which theology must attend. To that point, he reported, “of an inward, self-moving scheme in the life of the Church itself, I had no conception whatever.”\footnote{Ibid.}

In 1837, Nevin started teaching Church History at Western Seminary. At the time he did not feel ready to teach in this new mode, and he simply assigned the standard texts he had read at Princeton. He may have been in the midst of an intellectual awakening, but he was still working out its implications. One way he could have appropriated Neander’s work would be to emulate Neander himself by moving toward a mystical piety that could exist alongside a relativistic historicism. Neander’s biographies intended to show how the ideal life of Christ was embodied in various individuals within the ebb and flow of historical circumstances. This “life” remains behind or above all particular doctrinal articulations and practical forms and was embodied and conceived in substantially different ways over the course of eighteen centuries.

The “cultured despisers of religion” to which Friedrich Schleiermacher directed his famous 1799 speeches may have found an aesthetic appeal in Neander’s historical renderings that awakened a longing, or at least an appreciation, for “religion,” and its infinitely varied expression in finite individuals. In this case, however, Neander’s historical studies had a different impact on an American Presbyterian trained in Reformed dogmatics at Princeton. For Nevin, whose formal theological training had sharply

\footnote{Ibid., 46.}
distinguished the spiritual from the material, generally at the expense of the latter, Neander’s works moved him “from the simply subjective in religion toward the supernatural objective; from the spiritually abstract to the historically concrete; from the Gnostically ideal to the Christologically real.”⁶⁰

As we will see in subsequent chapters, this last remark, written three decades after Nevin’s arrival in Mercersburg, could serve as a description of the Mercersburg Theology in nuce, considered from a systematic philosophical-theological perspective. The Nevin of 1840 would almost certainly not yet have articulated it in that way, even if a clear trajectory for his convictions can be discerned. Nevin and his seminary teachers were equally committed to the notion that Christianity was most certainly an existentially experienced “life” and not merely a set of propositions proposed to the intellect.⁶¹ His gradual departure from the Princeton Theology had much to do with the nature of the objective grounding of that “life.”

_A Higher Synthesis_

Nevin’s first biographer gave a helpful summary description of Nevin’s basic philosophical orientation:

As a general theory [Nevin] regarded the mass of our conceptions and ideas as mere abstractions formed by the human mind, or as he was accustomed to call them, “abstract generalities”; but there were some generalities, such as the State, the Church, the [human] race . . . and others which had to him a concrete existence. This kind of realism pervades all of his writing and with other profound thinkers he thought it helped very materially to a right understanding of the scripture, much better than the old nominalism.⁶²

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⁶⁰ Ibid., 145.
⁶¹ Layman examined Nevin’s series of editorials for _The Friend_ entitled “Religion a Life” in “The Sources of Nevin’s Piety” (cited above).
⁶² Appel, _Life_, 294.
For Nevin, to turn away from the “spiritually abstract” toward the “concrete” was to encounter the most important realities in and through, but also beyond, the particulars of history and scripture.

As he told the German Reformed in his inaugural address, the church’s educational institutions must help students (who would in turn lead others) to "soar in spirit above the region of sense and particular opinion" so that their dwelling might be “mainly at least, in the empyrean sphere of absolute and eternal truth." This was a task particularly suited to the Germans of America, he claimed. As he had come to believe about the German people:

Qualities of sterling value are imbedded in their spiritual nature, which need only to be properly developed by means of knowledge and religion, working hand in hand, to place them as a people in the very foremost rank of excellence and greatness. The German mind is constitutionally vigorous and free. Simplicity, honesty and integrity characterize it. . . . No people are more susceptible than the Germans of all the deeper and more spiritual emotions of our nature. Nevin qualified his praise with a reminder that the strengths of the German character become faults when carried to excess. Thus, the role of a “proper religious culture” is to remove or prevent “perverse, one-sided developments.”

“Happily,” he continued, the predominantly practical and empirical orientation of existing American culture was a wonderful antidote for “those moral aberrations to which the [spiritual] mind of Germany at home is most exposed.” The “original elements” of their national character remained present in the Germans’ moral institutions, now “modified to some extent, and cast, as it were, into the American mould, by the peculiar influences to which they have been subjected . . . in this new world.” In short, it was by

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63 Ibid., 125.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 112.
making their home in the United States—yet in their own way—that the German
Reformed could provide an invaluable service to their new homeland.

The ethnic ideology Nevin employed here sounds strange (and likely somewhat
sinister) in many contemporary ears. His initial characterization of the “German
character” seems primarily to have been inspired by his encounter with thinkers like
Herder and Neander, as well as the German language himself. Before concluding this
chapter, we will identify a few features of the German Reformed Church that, to some
degree, vindicated his expansive hopes for it.

Contextual Resources

If practical concerns called forth the Mercersburg Theology, these concerns had at
least two primary sources. The first is the set of desires and convictions Nevin had
acquired during nearly forty years of living near the ostensible center of American
religion and society. The second set of factors that gave rise to the Mercersburg theology
was the distinctive history and present state of the German Reformed Church Nevin now
entered. We will treat this issue in more depth in subsequent chapters, but a few details
are important to note at this point.

The German Reformed were primarily immigrants from the Palatinate region of
Germany and German-speaking Switzerland. The church’s first synod in America had
been established in 1747, so they were rather slow in founding schools when compared
with other American Protestants (especially their Puritan and Presbyterian cousins). For
their first half-century, the German Reformed in America looked to the neighboring
Dutch Reformed for leadership and oversight. When the American Dutch Reformed

66 Nevin took pride in his translation skills, and was quick to point out the deficiencies in others’
work. See, for example, the opening comments of “Sartorius on the Person and Work of Christ,”
asserted their independence from European oversight in 1791 the Germans followed suit, determining to take charge of their own affairs and authorize their own ministers (of which there continued to be very few).\footnote{For background on the German Reformed in the United States, I am primarily indebted to the treatment in Hart, \textit{High-Church Calvinist}, 63-71.}

The church’s confessional standard was the Heidelberg Catechism. Several of its features of stand out in comparison with the doctrinal symbols of Anglophone Calvinism in which Nevin had been raised. The first is what Nevin would repeatedly characterize as its “catholic” spirit. In 1558, Frederick III, a Calvinist, became elector of the Palatinate, which had to that point been in Lutheran hands. Upon assuming power, he mandated the creation of a confessional standard for his territory that would uphold and inculcate the Reformed faith, but in an irenic manner that could appeal to as many “Lutherans” as possible.

The catechism itself was primarily the work of theologian Zacharias Ursinus (a friend and admirer of the humanist and irenic Lutheran theologian, Philip Melanchton) who intended for it to be taught (from the pulpit or in other forums) weekly over the course of a year. Following tradition, most of the questions followed the texts of the Lord’s Prayer (or “Our Father”), the Decalogue, and the Apostle’s Creed. The latter of these is particularly important here, as Nevin claimed that neither his Presbyterian upbringing nor his Princeton studies led him into a serious encounter with the Apostle’s Creed.\footnote{“With all my learning I had not, even to this time, learned the Creed. In the whole of my five years at Princeton, I do not remember ever to have heard it used there as an act of worship. It was, for me, a sealed mystery still in large part” (\textit{My Own Life}, 65).} The creed would eventually become central to Nevin’s vision of Christianity: an expression of the living voice of the apostolic church as it developed “organically” in the life of the disciples and their subsequent followers.
Finally, the Heidelberg Catechism is not dominated by a stereotypically “Calvinist” emphasis on eternal divine decrees and discussions of predestination and reprobation. It maintains a devotional and pastoral tone throughout, following the lead of its famous opening question, to be discussed on the first Sabbath (Q: “What is your only comfort in life and death?” A: “That I am not my own, but belong both body and soul, in life and death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.”)  

Not long after his arrival in Mercersburg, Nevin took the opportunity to educate himself and his new constituency on their confessional heritage by writing a year-long commentary on the catechism in the denomination’s Weekly Messenger. Theodore Appel later concluded that Nevin’s discovery of the Heidelberg Catechism had much to do in transforming him “from a somewhat harsh Presbyterian divine into a broader German theologian, of the Calvinistic-Melanchthonian school, so far as his nature would permit of such a change.”

It surely did not take Nevin long to learn (if he had not grasped it from the outset) that the greatest similarity between his current and former positions was the fact that he was once again working for a small and struggling institution. Shortly after his arrival in Mercersburg, Nevin was asked to fill the vacant presidency of the denomination’s Marshall College after the death of Friederich Augustus Rauch. A German-trained

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69 “. . . He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and eager from now on to live for him.” A helpful work for understanding the Heidelberg Catechism and its context is Lyle Biema, An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History, and Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

70 Nevin published The History and Genius of the Heidelberg Catechism in 1847, which added his later theological and historical conclusions to these earlier columns.

71 Appel, Life, 132.
Rauch had been by far the most prestigious scholar in Mercersburg upon Nevin’s arrival.\(^7^2\)

Rauch’s *Psychology, or, A View of the Human Soul* was the first English-language presentation of G.W.F. Hegel’s thought published for Americans.\(^7^3\) As Rauch’s literary executor, Nevin saw a second edition of *Psychology* through to its posthumous publication. He also used Rauch’s notes to teach Marshall’s classes in moral philosophy. Through Rauch, Nevin acquired a more profound grasp of contemporary German philosophy and discovered more precise conceptual tools that seemed to offer a way of moving beyond the frustrating metaphysical stalemates with which he was long familiar.

Rauch affirmed an idealist standpoint in which what is truly real remains before and behind observable phenomena.\(^7^4\) At the same time, he wanted to be an orthodox Christian who brought together both “Hegelianism” and the best of Anglo-Saxon empiricism. He attempted to avoid pure subjectivism and intuitionism by insisting on a necessary, objective relationship between the ideal and the historically and concretely real (or “actual”). This relationship took the form of “organic development” (a phrase familiar to Nevin from Neander’s history of Christianity)—a process that characterized both world history and the lives of individual human beings.

Nevin’s description of the first edition of *Psychology* made Rauch appear to be the virtual embodiment of his hopes for a salutary leavening of American intellectual life.

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\(^7^2\) Rauch studied with (“right-wing”) Hegelian Karl Daub at the University of Heidelberg. The major study of his work is Howard J.B. Ziegler, *Frederick Augustus Rauch: American Hegelian* (Manheim: Sentinel Printing House, 1953).


\(^7^4\) According to DiPuccio, “While the body of Rauch’s work reflects the general outline of Hegel’s philosophy of spirit as found in the Third Division of his Encyclopedia (1830 ed., §§ 377-577), the first two chapters recapitulate portions of Hegel’s philosophy of nature—particularly the third section on organics (§§ 337-376).” See DiPuccio, “Nevin’s Idealistic Philosophy,” 22, n. 35.
Rauch was certainly a German, and “the peculiar, characteristic world of thought which prevails there, is the original and native home of his spirit.” But the “Scotch-English system of thinking” had made its impression on him and he was “prepared . . . to yield to it a fair share of respect in his metaphysical speculations.”

Here is a position which must ensure, at all events, an original work, a position new at least as compared with any from which observations have been made previously in this country. Such a work, too, may be expected to answer a most important purpose in counteracting and correcting the one-sidedness of both those antagonistic tendencies of the times, already mentioned, and reconciling and bringing together what there may be in them separately of truth and right . . . . The object of the work has been to reduce both to one organic form, that should embody the life of each in a single nature. This could be done, of course, only by ascertaining the truth itself. No other solvent could be considered sufficient in such a case to subdue and reconcile the opposing forces which were to be subjected to its action.

On purely intellectual terms, (though—again—the very philosophy in view here would find pure intellectualism revolting), this is a good summary of Nevin’s sense of his own vocation, with the difference being that in this case he was moving from a characteristically “Scotch-English” starting point toward German resources in search of (and service to) a truth greater than both.

Conclusion

This particular attempt to show the links between Nevin the Reformed theologian and Nevin the early nineteenth-century American owes a great deal to James Bratt’s excellent examination of “Nevin and the Antebellum Culture Wars.” In the introductory attempt to locate Nevin in the early American republic, the spatial metaphor of “center” was employed equivocally. In the first (“latitudinal”) sense, “center” meant something closer to “between”—a mediating space or charged field of tension between factions or

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75 Appel, Life, 105.
76 Ibid., 105-106.
poles in conflict. Such a site may become the actual battleground where contests between outside forces are decided.

“Center” can also be used metaphorically to describe an ideal state of peace, harmony, or balance. Such an interpretation was implicit in the “longitudinal” description of Nevin’s family home as positioned between cosmopolitan and hyper-competitive urban life on the one hand and the similarly brutish realities of the as-yet-unsettled frontier existence on the other. Something very similar is present in the Jeffersonian ideal of local democracy anchored in the yeoman farmer class.

Finally, “center” can be employed in a contestable, political sense. However risky and currently unfashionable, it is not easy to avoid speaking of “centers”—and, by implication, “peripheries”—when describing any form of shared human life. Nevin became something of a dissenter from an emerging theo-political synthesis that, in his view, could not make good on its claims to be aligned, in historically unprecedented ways, with the divine purpose at the heart of all things. If Nevin’s primary theological conversation partners were eventually the “mediating theologians” of mid-nineteenth-century Germany, Nevin the man was very much a border-state theologian.

By moving away from a mainstream denomination and away from the front lines of the nation’s moral and cultural battles (or at least somewhere near them), Nevin gained the freedom to move in a very different direction than the major alternatives in American Christianity, with less fear of institutional repercussion. Though his potential audience had been dramatically reduced, he would have ample opportunity to embark in a creative theological direction in his new post within an institutional setting lacking in leadership and a clear identity. The German Reformed Church also provided him with a theological
heritage just different enough, yet Reformed enough, to raise serious questions about the state of American Reformed Christianity in a form that at least some would have to listen
CHAPTER IV

THE ANXIOUS BENCH AND THE RISE OF THE MERCERSBURG THEOLOGY

Like the vast majority of American Protestants in the late 1830s, John W. Nevin watched the efforts of Anglicans like John Henry Newman, Edward Pusey, John Keble and others to promote “catholic,” renewal of the Church of England with interest but little sympathy. As reports of the national controversy over the Oxford movement made their way across the Atlantic, he dismissed their cause as nothing more than “New Mania.” However, in the later account of his “inner history” Nevin reported that while reading one of the movement’s *Tracts for the Times* (it is unclear which one), he caught a glimpse of something more:

I was not converted in any sense to the views of the book. But I saw (what I had not believed before) that there was deep intelligent conviction at work in the Oxford movement; that the men concerned in it were neither fools, nor visionaries, nor hypocrites; and there flashed upon me, at the same time, some sense of the profoundly earnest religious problem, which they were wrestling with, and in their way endeavoring to solve. That was all. But where I then stood, in the way of seed-thought, this was much.¹

This chapter recounts how, in the heat of a specific pastoral controversy, Nevin came to take up what amounted to the Tractarians’ “profoundly earnest religious problem” as his own. Though the Oxford movement had been launched by a headline-grabbing denunciation of “National Apostasy,” the “outstanding example of the Catholic tendency in American Protestantism” began in much humbler circumstances.

¹ Nevin, *My Own Life*, 148-149.
Introduction and Overview

In late 1842, William Ramsay, Nevin’s former Princeton classmate, filled the vacant pulpit in Mercersburg’s Reformed Church. During an evening service Ramsay designated a “mourners” or “anxious” bench at the front of the sanctuary and exhorted sinners under conviction to come forward so that their conversion could be encouraged by the church’s prayers and the preacher’s ministrations. The congregation responded as he hoped, with several long-time members leaving their seats for the bench while their neighbors looked on in fascination. As Nevin’s first biographer put it, Ramsay was “in his element and showed that he knew how to manage a modern revival or religious excitement.”

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 Asked to say a few words in closing, Nevin struck a discordant note in the midst of the proceedings by warning those present not to equate the act of coming forward with true repentance and spiritual regeneration. Shortly afterward, the church’s elders voted to call Ramsay as their pastor and Nevin wrote Ramsay to inform him that he supported the decision. He was glad to see signs of vitality in what had been to that point a rather spiritually tepid congregation. However, he asked him not to employ such measures in the future.

Offended, Ramsay declined the call, and publically denounced Nevin’s intervention. In defense of his actions, which surprised and upset many in the congregation, as well as his students, Nevin gave a series of talks, which were published in the fall of 1843 under the title, The Anxious Bench. He hoped to convince those like the puzzled, skeptical, and angered congregants and seminarians in Mercersburg that to embrace such practices was to play with fire. Much more was at stake than they realized.

2 Appel, Life, 158.
Debate over *The Anxious Bench* filled the pages of the denomination’s *Weekly Messenger* and other publications for the next half-year. In response, Nevin revised and substantially expanded his argument (lengthening the text by nearly a third), and a second edition was published in the spring of 1844. Two decades later, in the letter summarized in Chapter One, Nevin described it as the beginning of the Mercersburg Theology.

Because of its highly occasional and polemical nature, systematic analyses of Nevin’s thought generally pass over *Anxious Bench* with little comment. However, the tract is particularly important for this study. It was in the process of writing and revising *Anxious Bench* that Nevin came to believe that the decision for or against the anxious bench was, essentially, the church question itself. For this reason, there is a sense in which the entire Mercersburg Theology stands or falls on the merits of Nevin’s response to this controversy in the Mercersburg congregation.

Given its importance, then, it is necessary to engage in a close reading of *Anxious Bench* that locates it in the context of Nevin’s developing thought, its immediate historical circumstances, and the longue durée of the Christian theological tradition. Before turning to the text itself, we begin with some background on the German Reformed Church and Nevin’s first years within it. Ramsey’s revival was the catalyst for *The Anxious Bench*, but it also gave Nevin an opportunity to address other long-running and unresolved debates.

*Denominational Context*

Upon arriving in Mercersburg, Nevin toured his new constituency to introduce himself and assess the state of its churches. In published reports, he lamented that a sizable segment of the denomination was mired in what he considered to be lifeless,
rationalistic formalism. Since its formation in North America, the German Reformed had struggled to find sufficient ordained pastors for its churches. Members’ participation in the sacraments was infrequent and divorced from regular pastoral care and catechetical instruction. Many of these Germans and Swiss retained bitter memories of the wars of empire and religion that had swept their homelands in the past two centuries. Calls to support the training of more clergy were frequently heard as covert attempts to reinstitute hated ecclesiastical taxes from the old country. In short, many could not and did not want to imagine a way of life without the church as a backdrop—but only as a backdrop.

In response to similar conditions in the old country, central European pietist movements had been inviting ordinary Christians to heartfelt, active encounters with Jesus since the early seventeenth century. Such calls to conversion or awakening were issued in conscious contrast with what they perceived as the stultifying rationalism into which the magisterial Protestant traditions had fallen. Thus, because of the parallels between the two movements, at least some of the German Reformed in America had eagerly embraced the personal devotionalism and conversionistic urgency of the First Great Awakening in the mid-eighteenth century.³

Though the revivals were a generally divisive phenomenon throughout colonial American Protestantism, the German Reformed had not experienced controversy over the revivals to a similar degree. This was partly because there was not yet much of a denominational identity and structure to fight over, and partly because ethnic, linguistic, and other cultural differences generally proved more determinative for identity purposes.

³ For example, during the First Great Awakening, several German Reformed pastors hosted the famous British evangelist George Whitefield during his tour of Pennsylvania.
than the politics of piety. That said, twice in the decades before Nevin’s arrival, revivalistic movements had broken away to start new denominations.

In 1815, the followers of Maryland pastor Philip van Otterbein (a supporter of revivals and friend of leading American Methodist Francis Asbury) left to form the United Brethren in Christ. Closer to Mercersburg, in Harrisburg, Nevin encountered the Church of God, a denomination started in 1826 by the former German Reformed pastor John Winebrenner. The Church of God bore a strong resemblance to other primitivist renewal movements (such as the “Christians” and “Disciples” of Alexander Campbell, Barton Stone, and their followers) who sought to restore apostolic Christianity on the basis of the Bible alone, as interpreted by common sense reasoning. In the denominational press, Nevin singled out Winebrenner's "Church of God" for its Pelagian doctrinal tendencies as well as its "fanaticism," disorderliness, and self-righteous exaltation of ignorance (its services, which regularly featured the anxious bench, were reportedly marked by shouting, weeping, and, by Nevin’s standards, rank social disorder).

Winebrenner responded to Nevin’s invective with a series of articles in his own newsletter. He castigated Nevin for daring to play spiritual judge from the rarefied air of his seminary office. Would that Nevin might, like himself, serve as an evangelist who shares in the common life the people, rather than pontificating from the rarefied air of a seminary office. He would then know that the German Reformed Church is in dire need of vital religion, and would have little use for such high-minded, Pharisaical scruples.²

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Thus, *Anxious Bench* was Nevin’s response to Winebrenner—and all sympathetic to his views—at least as much as it was a response to the controversy over the Ramsey revival. Nevin was quite aware that he was not the first to subject the anxious bench to critique. Despite the fact that its popularity had already begun to wane elsewhere in the country, he concluded that the duties of his position required that he take a public stand against it. The controversy in the Mercersburg congregation reflected a live debate within the church itself over fundamental matters of identity and purpose. His challenge was to demonstrate that his new church could reject the anxious bench (and all that he believed it entailed) while remaining committed to vital, “experimental” religion. Though his initial argument appeared somewhat conventional, the grounds on which he eventually staked his case would turn out to be highly controversial.

*The Bench or the Catechism? Summary of the Argument*

Nevin hoped to persuade his readers that the anxious bench “is adapted to obstruct rather than to promote the purpose of true godliness, and that it deserves to be discouraged on this account.” Taking up the role of a Socrates of sorts unmasking the sophists, he contended that the anxious bench was the most visible and attractive representative of a pernicious system of piety and religious organization. In this system, ephemeral “success” and clumsy techniques substitute for authentic spiritual power and substance.

Two extended quotations convey Nevin’s sense of the problem, and evoke the tenor of the tract and its times. The first is Nevin’s account of a church meeting very much like the Ramsey-led service in Mercersburg:

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The writer was present . . . as a stranger in a church, where a preacher of some little note in connection with the subject of revivals had been introduced under the expectation and hope that something of the kind might be secured at the time by his instrumentality. The congregation had but little appearance of life at the beginning, and still less as the sermon drew towards a close . . . . The preacher saw and felt that he had preached without effect; and took occasion . . . to express his regret in view of the fact, and to add a few valedictory remarks in the prospect of his leaving the place the next day . . . . But the new strain, adopted at the close, served to rouse attention and create interest. The congregation put on a more wakeful aspect, and something like emotion could be perceived in the countenances of a few. The preacher took courage, and after a few minutes dared to try the Anxious Bench. As usual, the hymn was started, “Come, humble sinner,” etc., and carried through, with pauses, in which sinners present were urged and pressed to seek their salvation by coming forward. Soon a female was seen going to the place, then another, and another—till at last a whole seat was filled. . . . At the close of the meeting I retired, wondering within myself that educated men, as were both the preacher in this case and the pastor at his side, could so impose upon themselves as to attach any importance to such a demonstration in such circumstances.  

Many observations could be made about this passage, and we will return to some of them later. The immediately salient point is Nevin’s contention that the preacher’s decision to employ the anxious bench and its accoutrements was made in desperation.  

Though it might result in splendid effects, earning its practitioner the reputation of a successful evangelist, for Nevin, use of the anxious bench was evidence of spiritual weakness. It is a cheap theatrical ploy beneath the dignity of the gospel ministry. Though its advocates loved to contrast the anxious bench with the purportedly lifeless rituals of the traditional churches, he maintained that it was actually the anxious bench that worked as a merely “outward” and “mechanical” contrivance par excellence. How else to explain the almost brute-force manner in which this technique achieved what were hailed as eternally significant results, despite what had previously been an utterly forgettable service?  

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6 Ibid., 15-16.  
7 A more charitable reading of the service might conclude that it was the preacher’s vulnerable
One of the arguments offered on behalf of the bench was that it made it possible for individuals in spiritual distress to receive personalized counsel. To the contrary, Nevin argued that the system of the anxious bench eliminates the possibility of skilled pastoral care:

One of the most difficult and delicate functions a minister is called to perform, is that of giving counsel to awakened sinners. None calls for more caution and discrimination. It is hard to ascertain correctly the state of the spiritual patient, and hard to suit the prescription wisely to his particular wants. It is so where there may be the fullest opportunity for free, calm investigation, in the family visit or in a private interview. But here, where all surrounding influences conspire to complicate the difficulty to the greatest extent, in the midst of commotion without and commotion within, it is pretended to dispose of a dozen such cases perhaps in the course of half an hour. . . . The only fair parallel to it in the medical sphere would be the mockery of three or four raw practitioners going the rounds of a hospital, and administering to fifty cases of diversified diseases, within the same time, as many doses of Thompson's mixture, *Number Six*. In the latter case the thing would be counted and called *quackery* of the first degree; and it is hard to see why it should go under any softer appellation in the former. . . .

For Nevin, practitioners of the anxious bench attempt to mass-produce “Christians.” Yet any system that relies on such “quackery” is “unfavorable to deep, thorough, and intelligent piety,” he warned. Its methods produce a quick crop, while depleting the soil. The kinds of exercises described above “fill the Church with lean professors, who show subsequently but little concern to *grow* in grace . . . . The natural fruit of the system is a sickly Christianity that is sure to be defective or one-sided, both in doctrine and practice.”

Nevin’s case against the anxious bench itself can be summarized briefly. First, its use creates a distracting issue for the conscience (i.e., the ultimate question “shall I yield to God?” is eclipsed by a morally ambiguous preoccupation with “shall I go forward?”).

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admission of something like failure, and not the mechanical use of the bench, that led to the congregation’s receptivity.

8 Ibid., 45-46.

9 Ibid., 54. Emphasis in original.
Even more, despite its advocates’ unconvincing disclaimers, the bench usurps the place of the cross, as the anxious are given the impression that coming to the bench is the decisive moment in the salvation process. In addition, use of the anxious bench promotes personal and social chaos. Its high-pressure techniques arouse passions that are inimical to serious reflection and conviction and their regular use encourages a fanatical disregard for due order. Finally, the bench harms souls directly. It disturbs the faith of the truly thoughtful by heightening doubts (“am I truly converted?”) rather than strengthening faith, and it encourages the “converted” to rest their faith on the precarious foundation of their own inwardness.

Nevin pleaded with readers to see that seasons of religious revival are not to be pursued through anxious gimmickry. Rather, revival is to be expected and welcomed as a blessing graciously, though mysteriously, bestowed on churches that maintain a patient trust in traditional practices such as “faithful, systematic instruction,” “zeal for the interests of holiness,” “due attention to order and discipline” and “patient perseverance in the details of the ministerial work.” Such practices were features of the genuine alternative to the pernicious system of the anxious bench, which he named the system of the “Catechism.” If the system of the anxious bench were to gain the upper hand, he warned, old landmarks will be forgotten, people’s powers of discernment will grow dull, and conversion will be stressed at the expense of sanctification. Religious instruction in general, and particularly the catechesis of young people, will be relegated to a matter of little concern, if not omitted altogether or even denigrated as a hindrance to the gospel.10

10 To illustrate the sheer confusion and contradiction on these matters he identified Nevin added a footnote to the revised second edition [1844], which described a recent Sunday in a nearby church. In the morning, the church admitted a catechetical class by profession of their faith to their first celebration of the Lord’s Supper. That night, the same young people were drawn forward to an anxious bench in the hope of
Drawing to a close, Nevin set before his readers two alternatives: the system of the “Bench” and the system of the Catechism. He insisted that far more than matters of style was at stake. The two systems, animated by competing spirits, were locked in struggle, and all must choose between them (“the Bench is against the Catechism and the Catechism against the Bench”). He hoped to have left little doubt that it would be a “wretched choice” if the system of the Bench were to prevail.\textsuperscript{11}

\textit{Preliminary Analysis}

A tension runs throughout the first edition of \textit{Anxious Bench}. Was Nevin advocating caution or extremism? At the outset he stressed the need to maintain one’s bearings in a time of turbulence. “A new feeling is at work everywhere on the subject of religion,” he observed. And “as usual, the old struggles to maintain itself in opposition to the new, and a strong tendency to become extreme is created on both sides.”\textsuperscript{12} Yet how to reconcile this apparent counsel of moderation with his dramatic, agonistic description of the situation (“Bench” vs. “Catechism”) and his call to arms (by insisting that the anxious bench “deserved to be opposed”)?

The text’s ambiguous nature is also evident in later denominational historians’ divergent descriptions of \textit{Anxious Bench}. J.I. Good wrote his \textit{History of the Reformed Church in the Nineteenth Century} from the perspective of a segment of the denomination that fought a bitter conflict with Nevin and his allies over a liturgy inspired by the Mercersburg Theology. Good believed that Nevin had been a decidedly negative influence on the denomination, leading many toward decadent mysticism and ritualism.

\textsuperscript{11} Idem, \textit{Anxious Bench} [1st ed.], 56.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 4.
and away from the “Old Reformed” paths. However, in his account of the Mercersburg movement and its attendant controversies, Good compared *Anxious Bench* favorably with what he characterized as Nevin’s increasingly heterodox later writings.\(^\text{13}\)

On the other hand, Nevin’s former student and first biographer, Theodore Appel, described *Anxious Bench* as a pivotal moment. In writing the tract, Nevin decisively cast his lot with the true “Old Reformed” faith and bravely determined to stand against its substandard contemporary American version.\(^\text{14}\) It was here, with *Anxious Bench*, that the Mercersburg Theology formally began. (As we have already noted, this was Nevin’s own view).

These ambiguities and tensions illustrate the challenge of coming to terms with what, precisely, Nevin intended to include in his critique of the Anxious Bench. This is partly because he wrote while in the process of working out the theoretical and practical implications of his ideas and concerns. In addition, since he claimed that so much was at stake in this controversy, this study’s desire to give thematic treatment to the apparent “failure” of the Mercersburg Theology makes detailed inquiry into what Nevin meant by the “system of the Bench” a critical task.

We will trace this development by looking first at how Nevin explicitly denoted the “system of the Bench” in the tract’s first edition. Then, drawing on interpretive categories provided by historians of American religion, we will engage in the more difficult hermeneutical task of identifying the broader, and more controversial, connotations of Nevin’s object of critique. We will conclude with a summary of Nevin’s

\(^{13}\) Good, *History*, 144-146.

substantive theological description of the rival systems in the revised edition of Anxious Bench.

The “Bench” as Practical Arminianism
(Nevin as Old School Presbyterian)

What, precisely, was the “system of the bench” and why should it be opposed? Nevin defined the anxious bench as “the type and representative of the entire system of what are technically denominated in our day ‘New Measures.’” Despite the reference to “technical denomination,” he did not offer a working definition of “new measures,” nor did he refer explicitly to Charles Finney’s promotion of the skillful use of innovative techniques to elicit decisions for Christ, though the phrase “new measures” was virtually synonymous with the famous revivalist and his methods. Nevin seems to have assumed that his meaning would be sufficiently clear to his audience. By identifying the target of his criticism in this way, Nevin’s response to the anxious bench was what one would have expected from a Princeton-trained theologian. To show this conventional aspect of Anxious Bench, I want to identify the ways in which Nevin’s original argument reflected the concerns of the era’s doctrinally-traditionalist Calvinists.

First, Nevin insisted that the high ground of Protestant principle was at stake in the controversy over the anxious bench. A fascinating feature of Anxious Bench, particularly in light of his later writings, is Nevin’s shrewd rhetorical strategy of turning the anti-Catholicism of his opponents against them. Throughout the tract, he drew comparisons between the anxious bench and various “popish” practices repugnant to virtually all American Protestants of the time.

15 In addition, Nevin seems to have borrowed several of the arguments in support of the Anxious Bench, which he then attempts to rebut, directly from Finney’s defense of the “anxious” or “mourners seat” in his Lectures on Revivals (1834).
Nevin reminded his readers that the history of Christianity shows that all kinds of “new measures” have been introduced into the church for ostensibly salutary reasons. Icons, pilgrimages, rosaries, indulgences, and the entire institution of “monkery” could claim as much, if not more, biblical and pastoral warrant for their ultimately idolatrous innovations. To those who defended the anxious bench on the grounds that it brought sinners to the point of a specific, public commitment, he pointed out that the vows taken by members of Roman Catholic religious orders served the same purpose—and were equally unreliable for ensuring genuine, heartfelt commitment.

Nevin’s comments evoked a classically Reformed conception of salvation history in which the true gospel, with its proclamation of God’s sovereign grace, is perennially in danger of being pulled into the mire of merely human religiosity. From this perspective, the serial idolatry of the ancient Israelites, the myriad abuses of “popery,” and the system of the Bench all show that people prefer a god they can access at will through a system of fair exchange. It is simply impossible for natural, “carnal” humanity to accept that salvation requires a real death of one’s self or to embrace such a destiny.

His opponents responded to comments like these by claiming that it is the critics of the anxious bench who seek to quench the Spirit and keep individuals from a real,

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16 “If I were to place myself on what is called an anxious seat, or should kneel down before a whole congregation to be prayed for, I know that I should be strangely agitated, but I do not believe that it would be of permanent utility. But if it should produce some good effect, am I at liberty to resort to anything in the worship of God which I think will be useful? If such things are lawful and useful, why not add other circumstances to increase the effect? Why not require the penitent to appear in a white sheet or to be clothed in sackcloth with ashes on his head? and these, remember, are Scriptural signs of humiliation. And on these principles, who can reasonably object to holy water, to incense, and the use of pictures or images in the worship of God? All these things came into the Church upon the same principle, of devising new measures to do good.” Archibald Alexander, Thoughts on Religious Experience (cited by Nevin in “Anxious Bench” [2nd ed.], footnote, 55.)

17 In this case, Nevin charged, the Bench offered the possibility of justification by feeling, rather than faith.
transformative encounter with the living God.\textsuperscript{18} It is at this point that we come to the
second way in which \textit{Anxious Bench} represented the basic outlook of moderate and
conservative American Calvinists of the antebellum period. In the previous chapter, I
adapted Paul Conkin’s description of Reformed Protestants as the “uneasy center” of the
nineteenth century United States by applying it more particularly to Princeton Seminary,
and its distinctively American and nineteenth-century attempt to combine support for the
cause of revival (a controversial, “progressive” position in the eighteenth century) with a
staunch commitment to traditional orthodoxy. In similar fashion, Nevin worked hard to
protect a potentially vulnerable flank by insisting throughout the pages of \textit{Anxious Bench}
on his commitment to “heart religion” and the need for conversion.

Nevin assured his readers that his stand against the anxious bench did not imply a
lack of zeal for saving souls. His critique should in no way be construed as opposition to
the cause of vital religion because “the spirit of missions is identical with the spirit of
Christianity itself.” He explicitly excluded time-honored revival practices such as
“protracted meetings,” free (spontaneous) prayer, and missions and benevolent agencies
from the system of the bench. They were “as old as the gospel.”

Likewise, Nevin insisted that famous and beloved eighteenth-century revivalists
Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield had nothing to do with the system of the
anxious bench. Neither was a quack because their reputations were based on their evident
piety and virtuous character and not their mere effectiveness. Though both might seem to
have sided with the forces of enthusiasm and new measures in their day, they endorsed

\textsuperscript{18} In the revised edition, Nevin quoted from response in the \textit{Lutheran Observer}: “Who can behold
a congregation of Christians wrestling for an altar full of penitent, anxious sinners, and witness the success
of such instrumentality, and say, this is ignorance or fanaticism? God blesses only one way, which is the
right way; He has blessed this way, therefore it is the right way.” (Ibid., second footnote, 19. Citing the
certain innovations as extraordinary measures put in service of what they believed to be a vast, unique work of God taking place in their time. For Nevin, the heroes of the First Great Awakening were *evangelists* prudently discerning the movement of the Spirit, just as the original apostles were caught up in the unexpected events of Pentecost and its effluence. By contrast, contemporary quacks were mere *revivalists* whose biblical type is Simon Magus, the sorcerer who famously asked Peter to sell him the power to work miracles.

*Summary*

The nineteenth-century decline of traditional Calvinism, with its austere and undemocratic doctrine of predestination, is a classic storyline of American religious historiography.¹⁹ There is much in *The Anxious Bench* that makes it the kind of text historians find useful for illustrating this process at work. In the rhetoric of antebellum Calvinist theological polemics, the orthodox preaching and piety of the First Great Awakening had been replaced by the anthropocentric “Arminianism” (or Pelagianism) of “Finneyite” revivalism. On the rough ground of local congregational life, however, the battle lines never seemed quite so clear.

In his preface to the second edition of *Anxious Bench*, Nevin explained why so many good Christians committed to the righteous cause of revival were employing the anxious bench despite the fact that it was so dangerous and destructive. In his analysis, such persons have always condemned the system in its full development; they simply have not (yet) considered the anxious bench to be part of it. He conceded that the anxious bench was not the historical origin of this system, and allowed that it did not in all cases

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¹⁹ Noll’s *America God* is the latest contribution to this tradition.
lead to worse things, but it “constitutionally invol[ves] those worse things, under the least startling form, and legitimately open[s] the way for their introduction.”

Why is it, he asked, that most Protestants instinctively reject such a seemingly innocuous practice such as crossing oneself? Because it represents an entire system of piety, and it gains its intelligibility from its place in a network of practices and convictions repugnant to Protestantism. The same, he argued, is true of the Anxious Bench.

While this analogy surely helped readers grasp his intentions, it also raised a problem for Nevin. Why did so many of his co-religionists not make the same intuitive connection he did between anxious benches and a system of piety locked in mortal struggle with the traditional Reformed faith? As we explore this question, we begin to see how Nevin’s conclusions were pulling him further away from the uneasy center.

The “Bench” as Indigenous American Religion
(Nevin the Creative Dissident, or Reactionary Elitist?)

In February 1844, while the pages of the Weekly Messenger were filled with responses to the first edition of Anxious Bench, a group of Pennsylvania congregations sent out an appeal for qualified ministers willing to serve their churches. The rather lengthy and detailed list of desired qualifications included this description of a suitable pastor:

He must be not merely a favourably disposed friend to, but a consistent, unwavering, and decided advocate and promoter of family devotions, prayer-meetings, Sabbath Schools, catechetical instruction, Temperance, Bible, Tract, Missionary and Education Societies, and the benevolent operations generally of the German Reformed Church, protracted meetings, and the judicious use of the Anxious Bench as practiced by us, and when required by our people; no fanatic but a promoter of perfect order and quiet in the house of God on all occasions.20

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20 Advertisement, Weekly Messenger, February 14, 1844. Italics in original.
The advertisement illustrates the challenge Nevin faced in convincing his adopted denomination that it stood at a fateful crossroads. The German Reformed were generally conservative folk unlikely to embrace big movements and radical innovations. Yet these churches most likely would have concluded that it was Nevin who was being immoderate, as they saw no conflict between “judicious” use of the anxious bench, and the basic features of Nevin’s system of the catechism. By contrasting two systems that few others perceived in the midst of everyday life, and by insisting that a choice must be made between them, Nevin was abandoning the cause of true revivals and “experimental religion” after all?

Nevin’s description of the “Bench” as the system of “new measures” had some historical and conceptual precision, since it delineates a particular time period and names a relatively discrete set of practices, leading personalities and theological emphases. However, he intended to assess something more expansive and more deeply entrenched in American Protestantism than what new measures revivalism usually connoted in both practical and doctrinal terms. The more radical and controversial aspect of Nevin’s critique in *Anxious Bench* begins to emerge when we view the “system of the Bench” through some interpretive categories provided by recent historians of American religion.

*A Century of Revivalism*

As an alternative to the traditional practice of dividing American religious history into discrete periods of revival, James Bratt has advocated that we eschew a hard distinction between the so-called First and Second Great Awakenings. He argues that it makes more sense to speak of roughly a century during which “revivalism” came to dominate Anglophone Protestantism. He defines revivalism as,
a mode of religious mobilization that used a series of extraordinary meetings marked by fervent preaching and prayer to galvanize people into making a sudden, self-conscious (re-)commitment to faith. By its nature American revivalism has tended, though not uniformly, to feature heightened emotion or ‘enthusiasm’; to put a premium on personal experience, or ‘heart religion,’ over against established creeds, rituals, and hierarchies; to valorize liminal states and special intensity over against institutions and routine.21

This definition captures Nevin’s “Bench” quite well, including the metaphysical realism (note the reference to the “nature” of revivalism) that inspired his systems analysis. What does this definition help us see that Nevin’s reference to “new measures” might otherwise obscure?

Notably, Bratt’s account of revivalism is sufficiently broadly construed to include both conservatives and revisionists as regards controversial points of Reformed doctrine. For Bratt, fine-grained historical analyses that highlight distinctions between geographically and temporally localized revivals should not ignore the more substantial common and consistent features of this “mode of religious mobilization.” He makes this historiographical claim to support a broader argument about the shape of American religious history.

Bratt submits that during the decade 1835-45—the time during which Nevin was writing Anxious Bench—American Protestantism experienced a significant “reorientation.” After a century of ascendance, revivalism began to be challenged, on substantive theological and practical grounds, and from multiple directions. The great revivals of the eighteenth century had been perceived by their supporters as extraordinary outpourings of the Holy Spirit sent to usher in the millennial kingdom of Christ.

However, by the middle third of the nineteenth century, generations had come and gone,

and increasing numbers of believers were concluding that revivalism had failed to deliver on its promises.

“Revivalism” did not spontaneously appear on the stage of history, of course. Its various manifestations emerged against the backdrop of traditional, mostly legally established, churches, either as outside, dissenting sects or as self-conscious movements within them (some of which later became separate denominations — e.g., the Methodists). On this reading, then, Nevin’s “system of the Bench” is best understood historically as Bratt’s revivalistic “mode of religious mobilization” once it was no longer a widely dispersed renewal impulse and had settled into its now-acquired status of mainstream religiosity. As the reception of Anxious Bench shows, Nevin found himself in the strange position of critiquing a dominant religious culture whose distinctive features were shaped by the experience of anti-institutionalism.  

**Evaluations**

*The Anxious Bench* won the support of the *Weekly Messenger*’s editor, who printed many letters in which pastors and laypeople thanked Nevin for his clarity of thought and courage of conviction. A few attacked Nevin as an agent of the devil, sent to cut the nerve of evangelistic fervor and drain the lifeblood of the Church. Chief among these was one of his most vituperative critics, Benjamin Kurtz, editor of the *Lutheran Observer*.

The nearby Lutheran seminary at Gettysburg, and its President, Samuel Schmucker, had taken the lead in urging the German churches to adopt new revival measures in order to ensure the faith of their members and their own survival as churches.

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22 Or, in the language of the day, Nevin was trying to “come out” from “come-outer-ism” (an allusion to the classic text of sectarian Protestantism, “come out from among them and be separate” [2 Corinthians 6:17]).
in the new world. Kurtz was a particularly vocal cheerleader in the effort to promote and defend the anxious bench as a providential gift to be welcomed. The second edition of Anxious Bench carried a number of footnotes responding directly to Kurtz’s attacks and his extravagant claims for the salutary influence of the anxious bench (such as the claim that a recent revival, aided by the bench, had been one of the greatest since the age of the apostles). Here, Nevin frequently pressed home the question: if one intends to promote the revivalistic system so vigorously, why remain a Lutheran?23

Though he was writing much later, denominational historian J.I. Good’s assessment of Anxious Bench probably spoke for the silent majority among the German Reformed. Good considered the theological basis for Nevin’s critique to be basically sound. However, like the congregations who sent out a call for pastors who would employ the anxious bench in decent, respectable ways, he added that Nevin’s jeremiad was probably unnecessary and certainly excessive. The net result of Anxious Bench was to give aid and comfort to the opponents of spiritual renewal in the denomination that Nevin himself had so passionately criticized not long before.24

Again, was Nevin simply an anti-revivalist? The anthology Critical Issues in American Religious History includes Anxious Bench among the texts selected to represent the “Middle Period” of American History. In this section, a short excerpt from Anxious Bench follows Finney’s defense of the anxious bench and other new measures. The editorial introduction describes this controversy in the 1830s and 40s as a reprise of an earlier debate, with Nevin serving as the establishment clergyman denouncing the evils of

23 Kurtz responded to The Anxious Bench with his own “Tract for the People” (Nevin had subtitled Anxious Bench, “A Tract for the Times”).
24 “The [Anxious Bench] . . . set in motion a tendency that lowered the value of experimental and subjective religion” (Good, History, 202).
excessive religious enthusiasm (the role played a century earlier, during the “First Great Awakening,” by Boston pastor Charles Chauncy) and Finney serving as the champion for the cause of revivals and their focus on the religious affections (as Jonathan Edwards had famously done before him, over against critics like Chauncy).²⁵

As we have seen, the Nevin of 1843-44 would have been scandalized by this comparison with Edwards’ nemesis. However, a subtle, though crucial, difference between Anxious Bench and other “Princetonian” critiques of new measures revivalism is Nevin’s sense of momentous historical change. Put simply, for Nevin the balance of power had shifted, which meant that the uneasy center could no longer hold.

The Shifting Burden of Proof

One reason that eighteenth-century revival leaders such as Edwards and John Wesley produced so much creative theology is that they had to take their critics’ concerns so seriously. In a context where deference to traditional authorities and structures was simply assumed, they had to demonstrate that “enthusiasm,” properly understood, was essential to authentic Christianity. It was not, as some presumed, the seedbed of violence, disorder, and heresy.

By the 1840s, in the United States, the tables had turned. The upstart Methodists and Baptists best captured the spirit of the revivals in their regular practice and polity, and their growth had quickly outpaced the traditional Reformed denominations during the previous half-century. Among American Protestants generally, it was now taken for granted that authentic Christianity was characterized by a zeal for individual conversions and the practices that produce them. The preeminent concern of the churches—as

acknowledged by both laity and (most) clergy—was no longer disorder and confusion in the church, but the threat of nominal profession.

In the revised edition of *Anxious Bench*, Nevin voiced exasperation with he believed was an irrational presumption in favor of all energetic efforts to make Christians. It seemed that in order to avoid suspicion, every one of his criticisms of the “Bench” needed to be followed by an even stronger condemnation of the evils of merely nominal Christianity.\(^{26}\) Out of a desire to “quench not the Spirit” people were ignoring the equally biblical admonition to discern spirits. As a result,

> the only alternative they seem to see is Action or No Action. But the difference between right action and wrong action, one would think, is fully as important, to say the least, as the difference between action and no action. . . . Life implies action, but all action is not life.\(^{27}\)

By and large, Nevin’s contemporaries were most worried about the prospect of lifeless churches, whereas he was starting to insist that such a concern only makes sense when there is a church in the first place. In the first edition of *Anxious Bench*, he tried to anticipate inevitable responses by clarifying that the “Catechism” he offered as an alternative to the “Bench” was not the catechism as a “mere dead form” but the “living”

\(^{26}\) He had certainly done this in his earlier articles decrying the “worldly-mindedness” he had encountered among the German Reformed. In far too many congregations, Nevin claimed,

> To be confirmed and then to take the sacrament occasioned was counted by multitudes all that was necessary to make a good Christian, if only a tolerable decency of outward life were maintained besides, without any regard at all to the religion of the heart. True serious piety indeed was too often treated with open and marked scorn. In the bosom of the church itself it was stigmatized as *Schwermeret*, *Kopfhaengerei* or miserable drivel Methodism. The idea of the new birth was considered a pietistic whimry. Experimental religion in all its forms was eschewed as a new-fangled invention of cunning imposters brought in to turn the heads of the weak and to lead captive silly women. Prayer-meetings were held to be a spiritual abomination . . . etc. etc. etc. It is treason to the Catechism and to the spirit of the Church thus to put reproach on Evangelical godliness and brand as Methodism those forms of sentiment and conduct precisely which did practical homage in the fullest extent to both (*Weekly Messenger*, August 10, 1842). Cited in Good, *History*, 141-142.

catechism. The problem was that most of his audience could not fathom or envision the system of the Catechism as a viable, practical option for their churches.

An Utterly Impractical Crusade?

For later readers, it may be equally hard to do so. It is not difficult to characterize Anxious Bench as a quixotic attempt to roll back history. From such a perspective, by valorizing the system of the Catechism, Nevin was merely pining for a way of life that was quickly fading into the past in the wake of a variety of political, economic, and material transformations (his description of the Catechetical system was virtually identical to his later portrayal of the Middle Spring Presbyterian Church in which he was raised, with its “educational and family” religion). Perhaps most obviously, the formal separation of church and state in the United States left the churches to their own resources, and the churches—resourcefully—adapted to the conditions of voluntary support. “Revivalism” became the de facto form of piety because its emphases were ideally suited for success in such an environment.

A Fundamentally Unpalatable and Unjust Critique?

Others might find Anxious Bench to be not simply impractical or unworkable, but also unpalatable. According to Nathan Hatch,

> In the era of the Second Great Awakening, the most distinctive feature of American Christianity was not the surge of an impersonal force called revivalism, descending like manna from heaven, but a remarkable set of popular leaders who proclaimed compelling visions of individual self-respect and collective self-confidence.\(^{28}\)

As we noted in the introduction, what was described above as the transformation of revivalism into something like a de facto religious establishment, Hatch labels the “democratization” of American Christianity. The story he tells “is not one of established

\(^{28}\) Hatch, Democratization, 57.
clergy fretting about loss of social authority but rather the demand of religious insurgents to be recognized as the latest advance of Christ’s kingdom.”

Read in light of Hatch’s thesis, the Nevin of Anxious Bench certainly fits the profile of a reactionary. Recall his astonishment that “educated men” could supervise the absurdity of a worship service featuring an anxious bench, or his comparison of untrained ministers to snake oil salesmen. Nevin thought it was telling that “the most favorable subjects for the operation of the system are persons in whom feelings prevail over judgment, and who are swayed by impulse more than reflection . . . a large proportion of those who are brought out by it are females and persons who are quite young.” And again, according to Nevin, one of the problems with the system of the Bench was that it tended to social disorder. Citing a handful of injunctions from New Testament epistles on the subject, Nevin maintained that “there can be no surer sign of grossness and coarseness in religion than a disposition to tolerate [the] monstrous perversion” of women speaking publicly in religious assemblies.

To the contemporary reader, Nevin’s statements about women are particularly troubling. We should of course note that he was no different than the majority of his peers in this regard (including some supporters of revivals). We can also note that some women contemporaries of Nevin themselves expressed concern that revivalism demeaned women by making them objects of spectacle (e.g., his British contemporary, Frances Trollope).

Finally, without excusing or excising Nevin’s offenses, some contemporary readers might find in Anxious Bench an (perhaps unlikely) resource in the struggle

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29 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 58.
against a series of problematic dichotomies (public/private, head/heart, male/female) afflicting all areas of American life (in this case, the “feminization” of religion).  

There is no doubt that the “cultural ferment” that occurred in the young United States certainly had a Pentecostal quality to it, with spiritual charismata being liberally poured out on “all flesh” (including African-Americans, women, and non-elite Americans generally). To the extent that Anxious Bench fails to attend to the liberating aspects of the system of the Bench, Nevin’s discernment of the signs of his times must be found wanting. However, the last chapter’s biographical narrative gave reasons for concluding that Nevin’s practical theological reasoning was a historically and theologically defensible response to his time and place. From Nevin’s perspective, if early nineteenth-century American Protestantism bore certain features analogous to Pentecost, it also came to resemble the harrowing final chapters of the Old Testament book of Judges, which concludes with a harrowing account of internecine violence, and the chronicler’s famous summary observation: “in those days there was no king in Israel, all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”

One can grant that Nevin’s conclusion that the American and Protestant “center” no longer held (and that this required fundamental reconsideration, rather than merely “judicious” use of the bench) is a problem that is more likely to emerge for those privileged to live near a society’s centers of power. However, there is insufficient warrant for a reductive interpretation in which his theological concerns become nothing more than the sublimated expression of socio-economic anxieties. It might be easier to interpret

33 For a lengthy statement of Nevin’s views on gender/sex, see “The Moral Order of Sex,” Mercersburg Review II (1850): 549-573. However, Nichols observes that Nevin’s views on these matters were changing, as later (i.e., in the mid-1850s) began to speak positively about celibacy, both as an honored vocation in early Christianity, an as a contemporary option as well (Romanticism, 204-205).

34 Judges 21:25 (NRSV).
his motives along these lines if we had not already seen the ways in which Nevin experienced and struggled with what seem to be perduring dilemmas of American history. More religious Americans now certainly had a voice, but what would obligate them to listen to each other, and to discern in the process an authoritative judgment about their common good?35

It would also be easier to dismiss Nevin as a mere reactionary if he had stopped at the first edition of *Anxious Bench*, which featured highly sarcastic critiques of the system of new measures. In the revised edition, Nevin added a more extensive and substantive theological assessment of the “Bench” and the “Catechism.” The implications of his analysis would eventually make his claims equally unpalatable to many privileged American Protestants who had just as much reason to be anxious about Hatch’s “religious insurgents.”

*The “Bench” as Metaphysical Quackery: Nevin as Catholic Theologian*

For the revised edition of *Anxious Bench* Nevin included a new preface and cited responses to the first edition that illustrated what he saw as the histrionic rhetoric and shallow pragmatism of the Bench’s advocates. Other added material sharpened and deepened his description of the “Bench” and its errors. A new final chapter provided a constructive account of the theological basis for the system and an extended historical illustration of the “living” system of the Catechism.

Rather than convincing him to moderate his assessment, Nevin’s critics pushed him to claim that the system of the Bench could be soberly defined as a heresy. Thus, in

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35 This is intended as a rough paraphrase of Emerson and Smith’s verdict that “the structure of religion in America is conducive to freeing groups from the direct control of other groups but not to addressing the fundamental divisions that exist in our racialized society” (*idem, Divided By Faith*, 18.)
places, the second edition sounded more than ever like a typical Old School Presbyterian tract. “Finneyism” was simply the practical expression of “Taylorism.” It was “the speculative heresy of New-Haven actualized in common life.” Its underlying understanding of sin and, by natural extension, its conception of salvation and spiritual regeneration betrayed a superficial anthropocentrism: “a low, shallow pelagianizing theory of religion runs through it from beginning to end.”

As we saw earlier, doctrinally traditionalist Calvinists would have wholeheartedly endorsed Nevin’s earlier statement that "the friends of new measures affect to be more free than others from the authority of mere forms. They wish not to be fettered and cramped by ordinary methods. And yet none make more account in fact of [merely human] forms.” However, the second edition of Anxious Bench shows that it was becoming clearer to Nevin that the proper response to the idolatrous formalism of the new measures was not the (re-)assertion of anti-formalist principle, but better forms.

In the initial tract, Nevin defined quackery as “pretension to an inward virtue or power, which is not possessed in fact, on the ground of a mere show of the strength which such power or virtue is supposed to include.” Though he did not develop its dogmatic implications at that point, this definition is basic to the theological argument of Anxious Bench’s final version—and to the “Mercersburg Theology” as a whole. In a trope he would employ throughout subsequent writings, Nevin argued that the difference

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37 Ibid., 28. Cf., ”Now it is an easy thing to say, in these circumstances, that after all the Anxious Bench is not substituted for Christ. So the Puseyite and Papist disclaim the idea of putting into His place the Baptismal Font. But in both cases it is perfectly plain that Christ is seriously wronged notwithstanding. In both cases the error is practically countenanced and encouraged that coming to Christ and the use of an outward form are in whole, or at least to some considerable extent, one and the same thing; with the difference only that the form in one case is of divine prescription, while in the other it is wholly of man's desire” (40).
38 Ibid., 26.
between the two systems was analogous to that between magic and a true miracle. In the counterfeit miracles of magicians (recall the earlier reference to Simon Magus), “the higher force does not strictly and properly take possession of the lower, but it is presumed rather to have been reduced to the possession and service of this last, to be used by it for its own convenience.” Similarly, in the system of the Bench, “Religion does not get the sinner, but it is the sinner who ‘gets religion.’”

“Magic” astounds with visible display, but its nature is to work mechanically or extrinsically. Once the trick is learned, anyone can perform it. A miracle, by contrast, is a sign of something “large, deep, full, vigorous, and free.” The higher force retains its mystery and freedom, even as it becomes manifest in and mediated by everyday realities and agents.

For Nevin, the system of the Bench rests on a denial that “the life of the soul must stand in something beyond itself.” Put differently (and here, he employed one of the most common metaphors used by philosophical Idealists to illustrate the concept of “organic unity”) the system of new measures forgets that “the life of the branch is in the trunk.” In other words,

The true theory of religion carries us continually beyond the individual, to the view of a far deeper and more general existence in which his particular life is represented to stand. Thus sin is not simply the offspring of a particular will, putting itself forth in the form of actual transgressions, but a wrong habit of humanity itself, a general and universal force, which includes and rules the entire existence of the individual man from the very start. The disease is organic, rooted in the race, and not to be overcome in any case by a force less deep and general than itself.  

This is a classic explication of original sin—but articulated here with a profoundly different accent than the Reformed Augustinianism Nevin learned at Princeton.

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39 Ibid., 65.
Fundamental to the tradition of “federal” theology (from Latin foedus—i.e., “pact” or “treaty”) descended from Calvin was the idea of a series of covenants between God and humanity. In the original covenant, usually referred to as the covenant of “works,” God declared Adam to be the representative head of the human race. This was a conditional pact whose terms Adam failed to uphold. Therefore, in the temporally (if not logically) subsequent “covenant of grace,” God mysteriously elected a portion of humanity to be restored to by having Christ, the “Second Adam,” serve as their new representative.40

For Nevin, the theocentric character of salvation could not be preserved by opposing the individualistic anthropocentrism of the system of the Bench with an equally individualistic doctrine of predestination. His objection to the traditional “Calvinist” position was thus not primarily (at least not in the common sense) “moral.” The problem, in his judgment, was a failure to conceive of humanity as a generic whole, in sin and salvation—a failure that made necessary the abstraction of a “representative head” declared to be so merely by divine fiat and the increasingly abstruse attempts to explain the interrelation of covenants construed in extrinsic, juridical terms.41

Nevin believed that an account of human solidarity was necessary in order to demonstrate a compelling logic to the idea of an original fall from grace with catastrophic consequences for the race. Human beings did not need rescue from sin because of an inscrutable divine decree but because of the constitution of creation. As things stand, all

40 This systematic formulation of the “Calvinist” system was largely the work of his student, Theodore Beza (1519-1605). One of the major points of differences within “Calvinism” after Calvin had to do with the question of whether God’s determination to save a portion of humanity logically preceded the fall itself. See David A. Weir, The Origins of the Federal Theology in Sixteenth-Century Reformation Thought (New York: Clarendon Press [Oxford University Press], 1990) and R. T. Kendall, Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), as well as the discussion, based on these texts, in Layman, “The Sources of Nevin’s Piety” (cited previously above).

41 I am extending Nevin’s discussion here to clarify the thrust of his logic.
people are indelibly stamped with a “wrong habit” in the same way that an acorn cannot help but grow into an oak tree.

It was by applying the same logic to God’s gift of redemption from sin that Nevin arrived at the centrality of the church question:

The same depth and breadth are presented to us also in the Christian salvation itself. . . . [For] [t]he restoration to be real, [it]must begin beyond the individual. In this case as in the other the general must go before the particular . . . . The sinner is saved then by an inward living union with Christ as real as the bond by which he has been joined in the first instance to Adam. . . .

This inward living union consisted in a new life in Christ, who is “the organic root of the Church.”

Therefore, Nevin concluded, if the Catechism is to prevail over the Bench, “great account must be made of the Church.” Here too, the general must precede the particular:

the Church is no sense the product of individual Christianity, as though a number of persons should first receive the heavenly fire in separate streams, and then come into such a spiritual connection comprising the whole; but individual Christianity is the product, always and entirely of the Church as existing previously, and only revealing its life in this way. Christ lives in the Church and through the Church in its particular members; just as Adam lives in the human race generically considered, and through the race in every individual man.

As with other passages from the final section of the revised *Anxious Bench*, this is a programmatic statement for the emerging Mercersburg Theology. Nevin would soon give all of these matters much fuller treatment.

A (too) simple way to describe how *Anxious Bench* gave rise to the paradigmatic “catholic tendency” in American Protestantism is to claim that, by its second edition, Nevin concluded that the existential challenge of the system of the bench warranted a reversal of the classic “Calvinist” appropriation of the Augustinian heritage by

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43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 67-68. Emphasis in original.
privileging Augustine’s (anti-Donatist) doctrine of the Church over his (anti-Pelagian) doctrine of grace (and its corollary of predestination). The argument summarized here also shows the influence of Nevin’s recent immersion in German Idealism. As we have seen, however, its themes were certainly continuous with questions he had been addressing for much of his life.

The previous chapter’s biographical portrait enables us to see how Nevin’s hopes for his denomination (and, ultimately, his country) were at stake in the anxious bench controversy. He arrived in Mercersburg urging his new constituency to recover and cultivate their distinctive national-cultural genius for God’s sake and for the sake of their new homeland. Though he did not repeat these earlier statements to that effect in *Anxious Bench*, he clearly worried that the German-American Protestants were in danger of trading their birthright for a mess of pottage. Now, he warned, should the bench, and all it represents, be embraced, “the old regular organizations, if they continue to exist at all, will not be the same Churches.”

**Conclusion**

Intellectual historians seeking to clarify and assess Nevin’s contribution to systematic philosophical and theological discourse tend to pass over this highly occasional and polemical tract. However, to repeat a statement made at the outset of this chapter, there is a sense in which the Mercersburg Theology as a whole—particularly when examined as the “outstanding example of the ‘catholic tendency’ in American Protestantism”—stands or falls on the merits of Nevin’s case in *Anxious Bench*. This interpretation is based on several considerations.
First, a close reading of *Anxious Bench* enables a more accurate assessment of the Mercersburg Theology in light of Nevin’s own self-understanding. Nevin was a churchman first, and a scholar second. Though he strived for comprehensiveness, clarity and coherence, he thought and wrote as a leader entrusted with responsibilities to and for a particular ecclesial communion. Shortly after his death, a former student and faculty colleague recalled that, at least for a while, Nevin’s position and general reputation for learning and wisdom gave him the status of a *de facto* bishop among the German Reformed.45 Since, as we have seen, the “church question” was a practical and existential as well as a dogmatic inquiry for Nevin, it is critical that such assessment takes into account the way in which the church question first took shape as a contest between the “Bench” and the “Catechism.”

Second, as we saw in the brief discussion of *The Democratization of American Christianity*, a historically located examination of this polemical tract raises the specter of the “vast practical embarrassment” that Nevin confessed in his letter from the 1860s, when he admitted the Mercersburg Theology’s failure to bring the church question to a satisfactory resolution. In contrast with the philosophers and theologians described above, who tend to pass over *Anxious Bench* when presenting his ideas, if cultural and social historians mention Nevin at all, it is likely to be in the context of a discussion of *Anxious Bench*. The *Critical Issues in American Religious History* reader locates Nevin in a minority tradition of anti-revivalism that has been, according to a widely shared viewpoint, on the wrong side of American history. The anthology treats the era of the Second Great Awakening under the heading of the thematic question: “what would be the role of religion in the early republic?”

The reader is left with little doubt that, historically speaking at least, Finney won the debate. In Nevin’s terms, the “Bench” triumphed over the “Catechism.” Thus, while the formal dogmatic positions of what became the Mercersburg Theology may be attended by a number of intellectual problems, Nevin (and, by extension, those who have taken a similar path) may be dismissed as irrelevant from the outset if his insistence on the priority of the church question is considered wrong or simply misguided. A close reading of *Anxious Bench* allows contemporary, constructive appropriation of the Mercersburg Theology to acknowledge from the outset the ways in which it appears, in this broader historical context, as unremarkable (i.e., unoriginal), unpalatable (i.e., reactionary and elitist), or simply unworkable (i.e. nostalgic or quixotic).

On this reading, the first charge cannot be sustained, as important aspects of *Anxious Bench* disappear when Nevin is subsumed under the perennial type of the anti-revivalist. The second charge cannot be adequately addressed without an extended treatment of a number of matters, including the unavoidable challenge of bringing contemporary moral sensibilities to the study of the past.

Finally—as regards the final charge that *The Anxious Bench* was a futile exercise in cultural nostalgia—we can at recall that Nevin concluded his description of the Mercersburg Theology by insisting that, despite acknowledged practical difficulties attending them, he had articulated certain “facts and principles” which— by simple virtue of their “biblical and historical” truth—

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46 Nevin’s critique appears briefly in a recent study of American religiosity. Kathryn Lofton compares Finney (“pastor to nineteenth-century America”) to the spirituality marketed by his “twenty-first century parallel”—worldwide cultural icon Oprah Winfrey (or, to be precise, *Oprah*). Though not endorsing Nevin’s verdict or, particularly, his constructive theological argument for the churchly system of the catechism, Lofton identifies striking analogies between the anxious bench and the spiritual therapy modeled and purveyed on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. As part of the discussion, she cites Nevin’s claim that “no conversions [were] more precarious and insecure than those of the Anxious Bench.” See Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 100.

47 This would also require attending to how one can employ terms like “elitist” and “reactionary” in ways that further understanding rather than stop conversation.
have a right to our attention.\textsuperscript{48} The Anxious Bench is therefore a pivotal text for historical and theological assessment of the Mercersburg Theology because, as he refined his reasons for opposing a particular revival technique, Nevin laid the groundwork for what has been widely acknowledged as one of the most important counter-tendencies in the history of American Christianity. Though these principles would be developed in subsequent years, the revised second edition of Anxious Bench made substantive and far-reaching claims about the conditions for the possibility of fully Christian existence.

\textit{Looking Ahead}

Nevin concluded Anxious Bench on a traditional note. To demonstrate the system of the Catechism at its living best, he depicted the pastoral career of the seventeenth-century English Puritan, Richard Baxter. He attempted to show how, as a faithful preacher, catechist and confessor during a lengthy tenure that included the disruptions of the English Civil War, Baxter shepherded his small rural parish of Kidderminster through a tremendous revival of Christian piety without looking to new or extraordinary measures as a magical remedy.

Nevin would soon be pressed to defend the claim that that he was simply drawing from the depths of the historic Reformed faith by insisting on the churchly implications of the principle that the “general” must precede and ground the “particular.” By doing so, he had essentially embraced what Friedrich Schleiermacher had recently identified as the axiom that distinguishes the Catholic from the Protestant “type” of Christianity (i.e., that the believer enters into relation with Christ through the Church, rather than church

\textsuperscript{48} It is tempting to speculate that many contemporary advocates of the Mercersburg Theology neglect Anxious Bench because it raises these difficult matters in an unavoidable way.
membership being logically and theologically subsequent to personal faith).\(^4\) In the United States of the mid-1840s, one could hardly be more provocative than to urge Protestants to move in such a direction.

CHAPTER V
“CATHOLIC UNITY” AND THE UNFINISHED REFORMATION

Nevin published the second edition of *The Anxious Bench* in the spring of 1844. The tract brought him some celebrity and notoriety, but there was not yet the sense that a distinctive “Mercersburg” school of theology existed on the American scene. Later that summer, he finally received a full-time colleague on the seminary faculty in the young historical theologian from Berlin, Philip Schaff. As Chapter One noted, for the larger American reading public, the opening statement of the Mercersburg Theology consisted of Nevin’s translation of Schaff’s inaugural address, for which he wrote a lengthy preface, and to which he appended a copy of a sermon he had recently delivered.

Combined, the next three chapters form a single narrative. We shall follow the development of Nevin’s thought, in relation to his changing context, as he extended and clarified the principles that led him to declare that the system of the “Bench” posed an existential threat to the churches. Chapter Three’s reading of *Anxious Bench* leads into an examination of Nevin’s sermon on “Catholic Unity” (1844), his largest work, *Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper* (1846), and the tract, *Anti-Christ: The Spirit of Sect and Schism* (1848). According to Nevin’s own account, these writings set forth the essential theological commitments of “what is called the Mercersburg School of Theology.”¹ By the end of this section, we will have a

¹ As noted in the introduction, Nevin also included Schaff’s “Principle of Protestantism”
sufficient overview of the positive theological basis for the Mercersburg Theology, as well as the depth and breadth of Nevin’s critique of the American Protestantism of his time.

Studies of the Mercersburg Theology have generally devoted most of their attention to *Mystical Presence*. And for good reason, as it was Nevin’s most substantial publication and is now generally considered a classic in the history of American historical-theological scholarship. Since we are primarily concerned in this study with Nevin’s ongoing attempt to answer the church question, this contextual, diachronic presentation will give roughly equal attention to the two shorter works—i.e., “Catholic Unity” and *Anti-Christ*. Both texts began as sermons and both generally resemble Pauline epistles in the way that they move from fundamental theological affirmations to concrete ecclesial application. After surveying and assessing major evaluations of the Mercersburg Theology, as contained in these classic writings, we will move on to the final section of the study, which examines the reasons for Nevin’s admission that the Mercersburg Theology was unable to solve all the problems it set out to address.

**Introduction**

In August of 1844, Nevin preached before the Triennial Convention of the Dutch and German Reformed Churches. The scriptural text for the sermon was Ephesians 4:4-6 (“There is one body and one Spirit, even as you are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one Baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and

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(summarized in Chapter One) in his listing of the central Mercersburg texts.

through all, and in you all” [NRSV]). On the occasion of this formal acknowledgement of the two communions’ historical ties and spiritual kinship, Nevin took up the theme of “Catholic Unity.”

This chapter examines “Catholic Unity” as the initial stage in Nevin’s explicit engagement with what he called the “great life question of the age.” Though the church question began for Nevin as the contest between “Bench” and “Catechism” among the German Reformed, he soon placed the practical and theological concerns at the heart of *Anxious Bench* in a broader historical and ecumenical horizon. To convey a fuller sense of the practical stakes of Nevin’s fundamental dogmatic claims in “Catholic Unity,” we begin with a historical sketch that supplements the accounts in previous chapters and brings the narrative into the mid-1840s. In *Anxious Bench* Nevin based his case against the system of new measures on the principle that the “particular” must be preceded by and grounded in a greater and more general reality. In effect, “Catholic Unity” was Nevin’s attempt to exhort his fellow Reformed Protestants to transfer their primary understanding of *E Pluribus Unum* from the United States to the Church.

*Antebellum Protestant Malaise at Mid-Century*

Though I earlier characterized Nevin as “eccentric,” he was certainly not alone in warning that all was not well in the *novus ordo seclorum*. The time was ripe for asking fundamental questions about the status quo. When Nevin left Pittsburgh and Presbyterianism for Mercersburg, the “evangelical synthesis” that served as a civic culture for the early American republic was under severe strain. We can identify several reasons for this.
We have already seen Nevin’s personal experience with the first of several schisms to rend the nation’s largest denominations during the antebellum period. In each case, though to different degrees and in the context of different formal disputes, the rank and file clergy as well as America’s most highly trained exegetes proved unable to settle differences over slavery on the shared basis of scripture. Protestants North and South generally concluded that a categorical condemnation of slavery could not be based on a careful literal-grammatical interpretation of the Bible. In short, one could make an a priori case against slavery, on the basis of ostensibly universal moral intuitions, or one could maintain that the scriptural text remained the supreme authority, but it was not possible to do both—at least not without some hermeneutical maneuvering that raised difficult questions.3

As we saw in Chapter Two, the pairing of biblicist Protestantism with Common Sense reasoning had seemed ideally suited for the new order of the ages. In everyday language, this entailed a commitment to the Bible and “private judgment” as the publicly acknowledged arbiters of truth claims. Nevin joined other leading thinkers of his generation in turning to various forms of Idealist philosophy as an alternative to common-sense philosophical realism. He expressed this disillusion practically by turning from textual Biblical studies toward church history during his time in Pittsburgh.

*Hopes Disappointed*

In Noll’s retrospective historical judgment, the practical failure to resolve the slavery question sounded the death knell for the antebellum evangelical synthesis as the source of the nation’s normative public discourse. But what of the third component of the synthesis—i.e., revivalistic Protestantism? Historian James Bratt’s argument, referred to

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3 See Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*. 
in the previous chapter, is that by the time Nevin entered into his own as a theologian in the 1840s, a critical mass of criticisms had been leveled against revivalism as a “mode of religious mobilization.” After a century of sending established religious traditions into retreat by pressing the necessity of personal spiritual regeneration and warning of the dangers of an unconverted ministry, “revivalism” now had to shoulder the responsibilities of societal leadership itself. Conversions were not leading directly to a renewed society or to spiritual peace and maturity in the manner many had been led to expect:

A clear new revelation or a method of clarifying the old revelation, an exit from the roller coaster of enthusiasm into settled conviction, some delivery upon the promise of the millennium: these were the outstanding bills northern Protestants had to pay in 1840.

The later career of Charles Finney, one of the most powerful spokesmen for millennialist revivalism, illustrates some of the growing internal fissures in this aspect of the evangelical synthesis.

As Nevin acknowledged in the introduction to Anxious Bench, for most of the nation’s churches, the anxious bench and associated new measures were old news by the early 1840s. Finney’s semi-retirement from his career as a revivalist toward the end of the previous decade—as he accepted a pastorate and teaching post at Oberlin College in Ohio—represented in part an acknowledgment that the revival formula needed to be fine-tuned. Theologically, he began to stress the need for the special indwelling of the Holy Spirit in order for individuals to live a sanctified life. This move represented something of a departure from the “democratic” ethos of new measures revivalism, as the new emphasis complicated the simple saved/unsaved dichotomy by introducing a third stage—

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4 Bratt, “Reorientation,” 65. I am indebted to Bratt’s article throughout this section.
(and something of a spiritual elite) wrought by the third person of the Trinity, even while it retained a populist direct appeal to personal religious experience.

Controversies over abolitionism had also sapped momentum from Finney’s crusades, leading Finney to moderate his earlier insistence that there was a direct link between conversion and enlistment in the anti-slavery cause. More broadly, the once-united front of the Northern evangelical elite could no longer agree on how to Christianize society. As Bratt concludes, "[b]eginning with the American Antislavery Society in 1840, the flagship organizations of virtually every cause suffered schisms in this decade, and over the same issues: the means and the degree of radicalism with which one should pursue the millennium. By the 1850s, far from riding a high tide of humanitarian reform, these agencies were, like Finney’s old poverty fighters, more secular, more subdued, and more given to organizational imperatives."\(^5\)

Another source of disquiet for the supporters of antebellum revivalism was the fact that standard evangelistic efforts were failing to make significant headway in the rapidly growing cities, now increasingly filled with non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants. By moving from upstate New York to Oberlin, Finney symbolically abandoned the urban campaign and retreated to an outpost of traditional Yankee culture in rural Ohio. Significantly, many of these new immigrants were Roman Catholics.

*The (Welcome?) Reappearance of an Old Nemesis*

For many antebellum Protestants, the arrival of Catholics in socially significant numbers posed an existential threat to the new order of the ages. Entrepreneurs made a hefty profit by stoking the fires of anti-Catholic prejudice, and anti-immigrant and anti-

\(^5\) Ibid.
Catholic “Nativism” became a significant force on the national political scene.\(^6\) The xenophobic Native American Party formed in the early 1840s. It, and similar groups (such as the later, more politically successful American or “Know-Nothing” Party) gathered enough support to contribute to the break up of the Whig-Democrat “second party system” over the course of the ensuing decade.

The reappearance of this old nemesis *en mass* gave American Protestants all the more reason to be ashamed of their lack of unity. In the wake of the much earlier Cane Ridge revival, Alexander Campbell, Barton Stone, and their followers had sought to purify American Christianity by restoring the pattern of the primitive church, based solely on explicit scriptural warrant, and by eschewing all particular, partisan denominational labels acquired over the course of a sordid history no longer applicable in the *novus ordo seclorum*.\(^7\) Yet by the 1840s, this group that had initially rejected any name but “Christian” was also settling into the all-too-familiar form of multiple denominations.

In the end, however, defensive Anti-Catholicism proved able to galvanize a more potent kind of Protestant solidarity and provided a welcome relief from troubled introspection. As we noted in Chapter One, the Presbyterian General Assembly took the trouble in 1835 to pass a resolution declaring the Roman Catholic Church a “false church.” A decade later, a similar statement by the Old School assembly went so far as to state formally that Roman Catholic baptisms were invalid. In 1846, the Evangelical


Alliance formed in England, largely as an effort to oppose the Catholic threat and to strengthen trans-Atlantic revivalistic Protestantism against its increasingly emboldened (mainly high church) critics, since the Alliance’s constituency was generally charged with fomenting the centrifugal ecclesial tendencies of recent history.⁸

High church Protestantism in the United States was statistically insignificant at the time, and so it was the threat of Romanism that took center stage on this side of the Atlantic. Bratt is again helpful here. “By 1845,” he concludes, “American Christianity was set on a two-party course, with Protestant versus Catholic displacing the popular versus elite or pro-versus anti-revivalist postures characteristic of the early republic.”⁹ This historical verdict makes Nevin’s turn toward a classically “Catholic” account of the churchly essence of Christianity in Anxious Bench all the more noteworthy.¹⁰ It also provides further support for the conclusion that the Nevin of Anxious Bench was not simply a garden variety anti-revivalist or counter-revolutionary.

The most explosive public controversy arising from this renewal of old animosities in the new world had to do with American Catholics’ increasingly self-confident protest against the generically Protestant character of instruction in the new public or common schools (as shown by, e.g., mandatory reading of the King James Bible). Combined with strategic, concentrated power at the ballot box, this show of solidarity reinforced nativist fears of a popish plot to undermine American democracy,

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⁸ Members of the Evangelical Alliance subscribed to nine principles of faith, including “the right and duty of private judgment in the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures” and “the justification of the sinner by faith alone.” For a history of the alliance, whose American branch was organized in 1867, see Philip D. Jordan, The Evangelical Alliance for the United States of America, 1847-1900: Ecumenism, Identity, and the Religion of the Republic (New York: E. Mellen, 1982).


¹⁰ Catholic is capitalized here, since Schleiermacher employed it in the sense of a historical, dialectical relationship with “Protestant,” rather than in a generic sense.
starting with the very nursery of liberty. Chapter One noted how simmering tensions over the school question boiled over in the late spring and early summer of 1844, filling Philadelphia’s streets with rival armed mobs.

Summary

The German Reformed were caught between these warring parties. As regards language, ethnicity, and general culture, they were not “natives,” as vigilant xenophobes were then defining the term. Yet they were still Protestants. As the controversy over the Anxious Bench showed, they had yet to resolve, as a church, what it would mean to be German, Reformed, and American. Nevin’s tract forced many of these issues to the surface, and the emergence of the Mercersburg Theology brought them to the fore. This was the broader context for Nevin’s call for catholic unity in August 1844, when the memory of the Philadelphia riots was still fresh.

“Catholic Unity”

12 John W. Nevin, “Catholic Unity [A Sermon Delivered At the Opening of the Triennial Convention of the Reformed Churches, At Harrisburg, Pa., August 8th, 1844],” in The Anxious Bench,
Nevin observed that the Ephesians text presents Christ not simply as the one who reconciles individual human beings with God, but as the end of all human strife, starting with the healing of the paradigmatic Jew-Gentile divide. Because this unity in Christ is confessed as a prior reality, it cannot be a mere aspiration, he insisted. Rather, the declaration (“there is one body and one Spirit”) serves as the basis for any imperatives that follow (“and therefore you are bound to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”). With this established, he turned to consider more fully the nature of “catholic unity” and the present duties of Christians toward it.

*The Nature of Catholic Unity*

Nevin began by clarifying that the unity proper to the church is not bare uniformity, the abstract affirmation of singularity. If the possibility of difference and distinction is ruled out on principle, the “one” that remains is nothing more than “a sheer abstraction, an absolute nullity.” For unity to be real it must be organic, he continued. Real union must be distinguished from abstract collectivities in which an extrinsic principle is imposed upon assorted particulars. The differences that exist must be capable of meaningful comprehension within a more general reality or form.

In a contrast pair he would henceforth employ with regularity, Nevin maintained that the operative term for understanding the church’s unity is not the cumulative, quantitative metric of “all” but the more qualitative notion of “whole.” From this, it follows that the Church is not the sum total of individual believers. It is rather, in a real

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13 We can observe in passing here the formal resemblance between this statement and Nevin’s description of the Mercersburg Theology as beset with practical difficulties, yet grounded in biblical and historical “facts” that cannot not be ignored. Here again, the general (questions of truth) precedes the particular (prudential reasoning about the proper means to employ toward an established end).  
14 “Catholic Unity,” ibid.
sense, “a living body, animated by the life of Christ.” Therefore, to speak of Christian Unity is to acknowledge that Jesus Christ is “the principle or root of the Church; and the Church through all ages is one, simply because it stands, in the presence and power of this root, universally and forever.”

Though it rightfully appears diverse and multiform, the whole is “actuated by the power of a common life.” Therefore, “Christians are necessarily one before they can be many.”

In a rhetorically understated, but highly provocative (for a Protestant) summary of the doctrinal implications of the forgoing assertions, Nevin insisted that to be a Christian is not simply to be placed in a new relation to the moral law, in an “outward forensic way.” Rather, a Christian is a human being that receives a new nature “by an actual communication of the Savior’s life into his person.” Again, he continued, this does not merely entail the acquisition of a newfound capability to imitate Christ, or the establishment of the kind of moral sympathy that exists among intimate friends. It involves a process by which the “whole humanity” of Christ is gradually “carried over into the person of the believer.” The incorporation of a person’s very life—body and soul—into Christ’s more general life makes it possible for salvation and its constituent benefits (forgiveness, justification, etc.) to be a full-fledged, existential reality, rather than a merely abstract notion or legal fiction.

Repeating a theme from Anxious Bench, Nevin acknowledged that such a union with Christ may certainly be characterized as mystical. But he insisted that it is no more

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15 Ibid., 3.
16 In the published sermon Nevin cited Calvin’s commentary on 1 Corinthians in support of the claim that the Church must always be one, simply because Christ is one, and the Church has its life from and in Christ.
17 Ibid., 7.
18 Ibid.
implausible a notion than the idea of humanity’s union with the person of the “first Adam.” As a tree shares in the “life” of the acorn from which it grew, so all human beings from birth participate in Adam’s general “life.” Moreover, as the full-grown Oak contains nothing that was not already present in potential in the acorn, so, too, with the Church’s union with Christ: “to the end of time, [the Church] can include no more in its proper life, however widely distributed, than what is included in the root itself.”

It was evident, Nevin believed, that the theme of the Christian’s mystical union with Christ pervades the New Testament. Moreover, its prominence makes the “popish” and “semi-popish” (i.e., Lutheran) errors regarding the Lord’s Supper intelligible as distortions of a genuine and vital truth, rather than inexplicable hocus pocus. More importantly, he continued, this explains why the Reformers—not least, John Calvin himself—“generally maintained” a doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

It was crucial for Nevin that the great teachers and doctrinal symbols of the Reformed tradition agreed that to be a Christian is to enter into a salvific, mystical union with the entire person of Christ. Because the believer’s mystical union with Christ includes the entire person, flesh and spirit, it must be more than merely moral or “spiritual” (i.e., mental). Similarly, he continued, while the mystical union of all Christians in Christ is first of all inward and invisible (the “body” per se is not the human person), for the unity of Christians to be real, it must also be outward and visible (“there

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19 Ibid.
20 Nevin reminded his Dutch and German Reformed audience that, unlike many of his contemporary expositors, Calvin himself was “particularly strong with regard to this point.” In an extended footnote, he cited the then-standard Reformed dogmatics textbook of Scottish divine John Dick (1764-1833) in which Dick admitted to being unable to make any sense of Calvin’s statements about communion with the “flesh” of Christ (ibid., footnote, 5). At the time Nevin was still assigning Dick’s Lectures on Theology (Philadelphia, 1844) to his own students.
can be no man, when there is no body”). Therefore, he concluded, to neglect the necessity of the church’s visible (i.e., “fleshly”) unity is to “make shipwreck” of the gospel itself. Though the church is more than external association, if the world’s many Christians and their diverse communities are truly “in Christ” their unity should be outwardly and visibly manifested.

“The Present Duties of Christians Toward ‘Catholic Unity’”

What specific obligations did this theological description of existence “in Christ” entail for American Christians in the late summer of 1844? He assured the congregation that the present dearth of visible unity did not automatically invalidate various denominations’ respective claims to be “in Christ.” Thus, “we have no doubt that Protestant denominational distinctions have not destroyed the life of the Church . . . . The ‘one body’ is wanting, but the one Spirit remains.”

He denied that this amounted to an endorsement of the present state of affairs. Rather, it was an acknowledgement that the creation is constituted such that the “ideal” is driven by an “inward necessity” to become “actual.” As a general rule, he claimed, this takes place in a gradual way, by “development and process.” However, he clarified, the process is not blind, impersonal, or strictly necessary. The ideal becomes actual through moral development, which requires the involvement of intelligence and will. Once this is grasped, the proper response to Christian disunity will be clear: “the whole church then must be regarded as inwardly groaning over her own divisions . . . as though Christ himself were made to feel himself divided, and could not rest until such unnatural violence should come to an end.”

21 Ibid., 9.
22 Ibid., 10.
Nevin’s specific calls to action followed rather straightforwardly from these claims, as he continued to insist on the necessity of the outward and visible—but only on the basis of a prior dependence on the inward and invisible. Thus, as he had already intimated, the most fundamental duty of Christians towards catholic unity, is repentance. His listeners were apparently familiar with utilitarian arguments that portrayed the numerous Christian sects in America as, ultimately, no more than “different divisions of the same grand army, furnished for battle variously according to their several tastes, but all moving in the same direction against the common foe . . .” He pleaded with them to see that any practical benefits resulting from actually existing denominational divisions are like the good that God is always capable of bringing out of evil. Rather than the best of all possible worlds, “the present state of the Church involves the sin of schism to a most serious extent.”

According to Nevin, the problem was not that the churches lack a single head (as the “Romanists” claim), nor is it because they lack a single outward organization (as the [Anglo-Catholic] “Puseyites” insist). Generally speaking, he continued, it is necessary to abandon hope that any “simply outward reform” can provide for true catholic unity. Therefore, to establish a “no-sect party” will only exacerbate the problem. This is so because “it is not by removing their allegiance to particular denominations, and affecting to hold themselves independent of all, that men [sic] may expect to promote the cause of Christian unity.”

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23 Ibid., 11.
24 Nevin clearly had Winebrenner’s “Church of God” in view here, and most likely the Stone-Campbell Restorationists as well.
25 Ibid., 13.
Nevin took pains to clarify that he was not presuming to label all distinctive traditions, confessions or communions as inherently schismatic. He seems to have been granting that nineteenth-century Americans were not directly responsible for their various ecclesial inheritances. Moreover, as he did not identify a particular visible, concrete center or structure for “catholic unity,” Christians could not be culpable for refusing to leave various false churches to join it. Nevertheless, he maintained that only a sub-Christian mentality could create and sustain the sense that the denominational divisions that do exist can be ultimately justified.

In short, he concluded, America’s divided Christians must cultivate the kinds of dispositions older penitential manuals described in detail (e.g., “contrition,” “compunction,” etc.):

Let it be admitted that there is no way open by which, we have any prospect of seeing these walls of partition broken down; still it is nonetheless the duty of all who love Christ to take to heart the presence of the evil itself, and to be humbled before God on account of it, and to desire earnestly that it might come to an end. What is most deplorable in the case, is that so many should be willing to acquiesce in it, as something necessary and never to be changed.26

In a statement that could be taken as programmatic for the Mercersburg Theology, Nevin implored the congregation to acknowledge that “an evil does not cease to be such, simply because it may seem to exclude all hope of correction.”27

If the achievement of genuine, visible catholic unity through direct external methods is not an option, he continued, the most important progress toward visible Christian union will occur as more Christians cultivate a true “church feeling” and existentially grasp the truth of the mystical union with Christ, with all its outward implications. Yet despite this insistence that the real work of pursuing Christian unity

26 Ibid., 12.
27 Ibid.
begins inwardly, Nevin encouraged his listeners to do what they could to approximate the actual, visible communion of presently divided Christian bodies. He noted that the present gathering, though a far cry from true, organic catholic unity, was an encouraging instance of such work. It was an implicit recognition that the Dutch and German Reformed have, from their origins, been “substantially the same Church.” As for himself, Nevin chaired a joint committee that recommended a plan for shared missions in the West, a common theology text for seminaries, and an effort to move the churches’ liturgies closer together.

Reception and Controversy

Nevin’s audience likely responded to his most abstract claims with confusion. By insisting upon the gradual and inward nature of the ideal church’s development into full, visible catholic unity, Nevin may have eased the burdens of potentially conscience-stricken listeners. Had this merely been a collection of misty meditations? However, his claims at times sounded revisionist or subversive, but precisely how, and to what extent?

Perhaps the most provocative moment of the sermon came as Nevin drew forth the implications of his position for the shape of salvation history. If the preceding account of “catholic unity” was correct, and if one further assumes that Protestantism resulted from God’s providential direction of history, he argued, then it follows that the Reformation has not yet been completed.28 The present, divided state of the Church can only be a stage on the way toward its fulfillment.

These comments closely anticipated the message Philip Schaff would convey six weeks later in “The Principle of Protestantism,” when he called for another reformation

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28 “If sects as they now appear have been the necessary fruit of the Reformation, then must we say that the Reformation, being as we hold it to be from God, has not yet been conducted forward to its last legitimate result . . . .” (ibid., 12).
that would lead to the birth of “Reformed [or Evangelical] Catholicism.” Schaff was present for the sermon, having arrived in the country not long before. Upon hearing “Catholic Unity,” Nevin’s new colleague wrote in his journal: “I think I could not have a better colleague than Dr. Nevin. I feared I might not find any sympathy in him for my views of the church; but I discover that he occupies essentially the same ground that I do and confirms me in my position.”

As we have already noted, both professors would soon have great need for an ally. Only a week before Schaff’s inaugural, Joseph Berg, pastor of Philadelphia’s Race Street Reformed Church, preached a synodal sermon in Allentown that contrasted sharply with Schaff’s call for a higher development of Protestantism into “Reformed Catholicism.” In an effort to exhort his church to cleave to “The Old Paths,” Berg retold the version of church history then standard among America’s Reformed Protestants. In this narrative, the true apostolic church was forced into hiding a few centuries after its birth by the rise of “prelatry” and “popery,” and the attendant endorsement of all manner of vile superstitions and tyranny. After surviving (mostly in isolated Alpine valleys) for more than a millennium as harshly persecuted sects, the scattered remnants of the church emerged triumphant in the sixteenth century in those countries where the Reformation’s rediscovery of the gospel took hold.

At the close of “Catholic Unity,” Nevin pronounced that all efforts to maintain the cause of the Reformation in the nineteenth century by clinging to the mere “letter” of its slogans were doomed to failure. Only by entering into the “living spirit” of the Reformers

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could their timelessly valid principles be conserved in the present crisis. The Mercersburgers’ challenge to the historical imagination of American Protestants like Berg calls to mind Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s observation almost exactly a century later: “Kierkegaard said that today Luther would say the opposite of what he said then. I think he was right—with some reservations.”

Bonhoeffer’s reservations, left unspecified in the immediate context of this quotation, highlight the theological stakes of the Mercersburg Theology and its move into historical-mindedness. The very clarity and reliability of divine revelation seemed to be at stake. Thus, Berg found profoundly disturbing Schaff’s claim that medieval Catholicism was the very “womb” of Protestantism. Since, as he believed, “Christianity is a system of divinely revealed truth, which is perfect, and consequently admits of no improvement,” to suggest that the church could undergo such profound transformation was to call the very basis of the faith into question.

Berg warned the church that, “if we admit . . . that the Church of Rome has ever been the Church of Christ, [we] concede the entire ground.” In his own publication, the Protestant Banner, he attacked Nevin and Schaff for exalting tradition above the Bible, the church above Christ, and the sacraments above faith. Berg was particularly disturbed by Nevin’s disturbingly “Romanizing” comments about the Lord’s Supper as a real communion with the person (and even the flesh) of Christ, rather than the spiritual reception of the benefits won by his atonement. He led the Philadelphia Classis to levy formal heresy charges against the Mercersburg professors and to reaffirm for good

32 Cited in Nichols, Romanticism, 108.
33 Ibid.
measure that the Roman Church was “the man of sin, the mother of abominations, etc., and as such . . . destined to utter and fearful destruction.”

The East Pennsylvania Classis (home to Mercersburg itself) rose to defend Nevin and Schaff. As the controversy continued in a variety of church papers, the church’s Eastern Synod took up the matter in October 1845. After a four-day investigation, the Synod vindicated the orthodoxy of the “Principle of Protestantism” and recommended that both Nevin and Schaff receive the support of the church. In the face of vociferous objections and in a time and place when anti-Catholicism was at a fever pitch, why did the Mercersburg Theology survive this first round of attacks?

**Divided Loyalties**

Generally speaking, the more urban and socially assimilated among the German Reformed identified easily with the cosmopolitan culture of revivalism and the parachurch organizations of the benevolent empire. Several churches in the Philadelphia area welcomed Finney into their churches to hold revivals in the late 1820s. Thus—as illustrated by Berg, the Philadelphia pastor—these churches were more likely to participate in the Protestant crusade against the Roman threat.

By contrast, the rural congregations (many of which were also still likely to conduct worship in German) were more inclined to mistrust both sides of the conflict. These members were suspicious of “Yankee” cultural and institutional encroachment. Such pastors resented the phalanx of voluntary associations that, in their view, were attempting to extend the “New England way” South and West into the American

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35 The Mercersburg critics generally felt shut out by the *Weekly Messenger* and turned to a number of other outlets, including the Lutheran and Dutch Reformed papers.
36 Ibid., 130-131.
hinterlands. A decade before Nevin’s arrival among the German Reformed, Finney had attempted to hold a revival in Reading and was bitterly disappointed at the lack of support and even criticism he received from local Reformed pastors. Though most of the German Reformed were no stranger to revivals, the conversionistic pietism with which they were most familiar (centered in the German university town of Halle) retained a deference toward traditional authorities and local autonomy foreign to the democratic and reformist populism of “Second Great Awakening” revivalism.

Clearly, a desire to retain their ethnic and cultural inheritance gave many in the denomination reason to be sympathetic to Nevin’s dire predictions about the effects of new measures. Whether they understood or liked the specific content Nevin was gleaning from the latest German theology and philosophy, a sizable portion of the denomination was surely proud that one of the most learned among the “English” had such an appreciation for the cultural achievements of the fatherland. Moreover, to take up the standard of the “Catechism”—in this case, the Heidelberg Catechism—was to turn toward particularity and historical identity. Nevin’s arguments for a churchly alternative to revivalism, rooted in their own history, had substantial appeal for a sufficient majority of the Church and its leadership. Once again, as with Anxious Bench, the question these German Reformed had to answer in the coming years would be: was “Mercersburg”

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38 Steven M. Nolt, “Mingle Our Religious Concerns With the Affairs of the State?” Nationalism, Reform, and Pennsylvania Germans in the Early Republic,” in Halle Pietism, Colonial North America, and the Young United States, ed. Hans-Jürgen Grabbe (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2008): 257-272. When reading issues of the Reformed Weekly Messenger from these years, one is struck by the amount of debate over the propriety of religious “colporteurs”—i.e., the traveling agents of the various voluntary societies (e.g. Bible Societies, the Sunday School Union, Foreign Missions agencies, etc.) that served as the sinews of the “benevolent empire.” As Bratt notes in “Nevin and the Antebellum Culture Wars,” the rural Scotch-Irish of the middle colonies and border states had long held similar suspicions—a fact that qualifies somewhat my depiction of Nevin as the consummate American “insider” in the introduction to Chapter III.
simply standing up for a healthy cultural conservatism or something more radical and
decidedly less appealing?

**Conclusion: Looking Ahead**

The village of Mercersburg itself may have been—to borrow from Matthew
Arnold—something of an isolated mountain refuge from the “darkling plain” upon which
“ignorant armies” were “clashing by night.”\(^{39}\) But the German Reformed Church was not
a haven from the culture war descending upon the churches and the nation at large.
Moreover, Nevin’s convictions about catholic unity would not allow him to seek that
kind of isolation, nor would unresolved tensions among those convictions leave him at
peace.

Nevin initially gave the urban, revivalistic, militantly anti-Catholic wing of the
German Reformed reason to consider him an ally. He had almost certainly voted with the
majority of the Presbyterian General Assembly in 1835 to condemn the Roman Catholic
Church as apostate. Soon after his arrival in Mercersburg, he reviewed Berg’s recently
published “Lectures on Romanism” and gave no reason for doubting that his views on the
matter had changed. According to Nevin, though Berg’s pamphlet was small,

\[ \ldots \text{it is large enough to drag some of the most hideous features of the Romish} \]
\[ \text{system into the broad light of day.} \ldots \text{The system must, by virtue of its own} \]
\[ \text{constitution, work for the subversion of our government. It works also to} \]
\[ \text{undermine and sap the truth as it is in Christ. It is the mystery of iniquity always} \]
\[ \text{ready to evolve itself anew from the depths of Satan in the soul of man as fast as} \]
\[ \text{circumstances will permit.} \] \(^{40}\)

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In addition, despite his Catholic theological turn in *Anxious Bench*, in “Catholic Unity,” Nevin was still willing to proclaim that the Pope was “justly styled Antichrist” for presuming to represent the visible center of Christian unity in his person.\(^{41}\)

Besides the social and cultural factors in play within the denomination, Nevin and Schaff were initially vindicated because they were sufficiently convincing in arguing that the church question had nothing to do with “Romanizing” the German Reformed. Rather, it was about finding a way for the pilgrim church to pass between the equally unacceptable alternatives and dichotomous ideal-types of “Protestantism” and “Catholicism,” as these options were paired, respectively, with anti-historical, arrogant theological “nativism” on one side and an equally anti-historical, anti-democratic (anti-American) tyranny on the other. Despite the fact that the Mercersburg Theology entered the American theological scene under a cloud of suspicion, Nevin and Schaff received an affirmation of their Protestant bonafides from no less an authority than Princeton’s Charles Hodge.

In his review of “Principle of Protestantism,” Hodge praised Schaff’s elegant display of learning and the acknowledged the gravity of his chosen subject. As for the argument itself, his verdict was mixed. Both the address and Nevin’s appended sermon contained “much that we do not understand, and much with which we disagree, and yet there is much that is healthful and encouraging.” In Schaff’s case, moreover, “there is a great deal that is due to the peculiar philosophical and theological training of the writer.”\(^{42}\)

\(^{41}\) Nevin, “Catholic Unity,” 11.

Since Hodge had been disparaging the mystical vagaries of speculative German theologians since his studies there in the late 1820s, this was far from an endorsement. He contended that Schaff (and, we can infer, Nevin) vastly overestimated the evils of American denominationalism (i.e., Schaff’s “sect plague”). As for rationalism, he hoped that Schaff would soon realize that, “with respect to the state of the Church in this country, Romanism is immeasurably more dangerous than infidelity.”

Hodge limited his specific commentary to Schaff’s theses, and he made no direct statements about either Nevin’s introduction or “Catholic Unity.” In an incisive summary judgment, he exonerated Nevin and Schaff from the charge of Puseyism or Tractarianism, which he determined to be little more than a reactionary retreat from the house of Protestantism into the dark past. The Mercersburg Theology, as it appeared in these works, could not justly be associated with the Anglo-Catholic Tractarians, because “it would be suicidal in them [i.e., Nevin and Schaff], and entirely opposed to all their principles to step out of the line ‘of historical development’ to which they belong.”

Hodge’s foreboding verdict identified the tension at the heart of Nevin’s pursuit of the church question. On the one hand was Nevin’s inherited American-Protestant sense of history’s clear, providential direction. On the other, as the next chapter will show, Nevin was increasingly convinced that something had gone tragically wrong, as American Protestantism had by and large failed to grasp the nature of the redemption made possible and present within history because of Christ. The “vast practical embarrassment” to which Nevin later admitted in his description of the Mercersburg Theology had much to do with the discordance between these two emphases.

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43 Ibid., 630.
44 Ibid., 634.
CHAPTER VI

MYSTICAL PRESENCE AND REFORMED RESSOURCEMENT

As we saw in the previous chapter, Nevin’s passing comment in “Catholic Unity”—that John Calvin and all the major Reformed Confessions taught that a real communion with Christ’s person takes place in the Eucharist—did not go unchallenged. After the German Reformed Church officially affirmed his orthodoxy, Nevin went on the offensive. He dashed off a series of articles decrying the “Pseudo-Protestantism” of his critics and immersed himself in historical research to buttress his positions. The eventual result was published in 1846 as the 256-page Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper.

If the best place to grapple with the “system of new measures” had been the anxious bench, it was now clear to Nevin that the Eucharist was the best place for an inquiry into the essence of what he had earlier called the alternative system of the “Catechism.” At the outset, he acknowledged that debates over the sacraments are never simply debates about the sacraments:

As the Eucharist forms the very heart of the whole Christian worship, so it is clear that the entire question of the Church which all are compelled to acknowledge, the great life problem of the age, centers ultimately in the sacramental question as its inmost heart and core. Our view of the Lord’s Supper must ever condition and rule in the end our view of Christ’s person and the conception we form of the Church. It must influence at the same time, very materially, our whole system of theology, as well as all our ideas of ecclesiastical history.¹

¹ Nevin, Mystical Presence, 11.
In *Anxious Bench*, Nevin had warned that if the system of the bench were to gain the victory, the old churches would no longer be recognizable as themselves. American Protestants would lose the ability to demonstrate fundamental continuity with the churches of the Reformation. *Mystical Presence* set out to demonstrate the other side of the process. Whereas the question in *Anxious Bench* had been, “What are the dangers posed by the system of ‘new measures’ that make it necessary to oppose it?” Nevin was now (rhetorically) asking, “What has been lost, or has all but disappeared, from the church that is of such vital importance that it must be recovered?” An examination of the theological and historical dimensions of Reformed sacramental doctrine was vitally necessary, he argued, because “the Eucharistic doctrine of the sixteenth century was interwoven with the whole Church system of the time; to give it up, then, must involve in the end a renunciation in principle, if not in profession, of this system itself in its radical, distinctive constitution.”

Nevin’s conclusion provoked Charles Hodge to engage him in one of the most substantial and sustained debates in the history of the Reformed theological tradition. A great deal has been and continues to be written about *Mystical Presence* and the ensuing controversy. The goal of this account is to explicate the basic features of Nevin’s argument, of which two are particularly important. First, it was in *Mystical Presence* that Nevin began to link the church question explicitly to what he later described as the

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2 Ibid.  
“cardinal fact” of the Mercersburg Theology—i.e., the Incarnation. Second, with regard to the historical (rather than strictly dogmatic) aspect of the church question, the substantial tensions within Nevin’s commitment to the all-important principle of historical development are prominently displayed in *Mystical Presence*. After an overview of Nevin’s *magnum opus*, we will conclude with a summary of the initial debate with Hodge.

*Historical Demonstration*

The burden of the first part of *Mystical Presence* was to demonstrate that, on the question of the Eucharist at least, nineteenth-century Reformed Protestantism in America was—to adapt Mark Noll’s judgment (quoted in chapter one)—“as different from sixteenth-century Protestantism as that Protestantism was from the late medieval Catholicism from which it emerged.”\(^4\) J.I. Good provided a helpful and pithy summary of the state of the matter in the theological shorthand of the 1840s. According to Good, American Calvinists (and Protestants more generally) of the time would have happily affirmed that believers encountered a “real spiritual presence” of Christ during the Lord’s Supper. According to his critics, where Nevin went too far, in “Catholic Unity” and elsewhere, was to insist on a “spiritual real presence.”\(^5\)

By including or emphasizing the word “spiritual,” both positions reflected Calvin’s desire to avoid binding Christ’s presence to the Eucharistic elements in what he believed was an idolatrously carnal (i.e., “Romanist” transubstantiation) and/or crudely local (i.e., Lutheran consubstantiation) fashion. By stressing that what was most

\(^4\) Noll, *America’s God*, 3. As we will see, Nevin would have argued that nineteenth-century American Protestantism was *further* away from the Reformers (save Zwingli) than the Reformers were from late medieval Catholicism.

\(^5\) Good, *History*, 222.
importantly *real* in the sacrament was the presence of Christ and not merely its spiritual character, Nevin believed he was honoring Calvin’s insistence (against those to the “left” of him on this question) that the above qualifications did not reduce the elements to bare symbols in order to maintain a vigilantly-guarded boundary between the physical and spiritual, natural and supernatural, human and divine.

The historical demonstration began with a normative statement of the doctrine culled from Calvin’s statements, major confessions of the various Reformed churches, and notable theologians up to the mid-seventeenth century. Next, Nevin brought forth copious citations from more recent theologians in order to show that a substantially different “modern Puritan theory” of the Lord’s Supper had taken its place. In addition to representatives of New England’s “Arminian” New Divinity, so despised by Old School Presbyterians and their allies, the list included Jonathan Edwards himself, whose theological legacy virtually all nineteenth-century American Calvinists wanted to claim.⁶

*The Classic Reformed Doctrine*

According to Nevin, the original doctrine attributed something specific in nature to the Lord’s Supper as compared with other public acts of worship. In the older view, the sacramental transaction was assumed to be a mystery (“nay, in some sense, an actual *miracle*”) and, as part of this mystery, the sacrament has an objective force, as the grace of God is “mysteriously lodged” in the sacramental exchange as a whole. It not only signifies but *exhibits* the grace of God in such a way that grace is *sealed* to the believer. The believer’s faith makes it possible that he or she truly *receives* Christ in communion, but the elements truly make Christ present.⁷

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⁷ Ibid., 104, 106.
Nevin’s earlier account of the mystical union at the heart of “Catholic Unity” anticipated his explanation of how the traditional doctrine understood the benefits of the sacrament. For Calvin and other adherents to the classic teaching, he argued, the invisible grace received in the Eucharist includes a real participation in Christ’s person and not merely his benefits, a participation that is “mystical but in the highest sense real.”

Finally, the older view recognized that for all these claims to be valid, “the communion of the believer in the true person of Christ . . . is supposed to hold with him especially as the Word made flesh . . . To have part in it at all, we must have part in it as a real human life . . .”

“Modern Puritan” Sacramentalism

What had changed? Specifically, Nevin argued, “modern Puritans” treat the Lord’s Supper as one among many ordinances used by the Holy Spirit to bring Christ’s spiritual benefits to the believer and to elicit pious affections. Since they no longer acknowledge that outward and inward “flow together” in a unique, powerful way during the rite, “the idea of a peculiar sacramental power, belonging to this form of worship as such, seems to have no place at all in [the] system.” Ultimately, while the proponents of this sub-Reformed doctrine refer to the Eucharist with care and solemnity, the ordinance is no longer for them a holy mystery that humbles all attempts to comprehend its character.

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8 Ibid., 108.
9 Ibid., 109.
10 Nevin’s “modern Puritanism” (which he sometimes simply shortened to “Puritanism”) was not based on any rigorous historical study of Puritanism. At times, he used it in ways that are roughly analogous to Noll’s “evangelical synthesis,” though that was not exactly the case here.
11 Ibid., 104. Here, Nevin refers specifically to his earlier quotations from the works of Yale University president Timothy Dwight (1752-1817) and Scottish theologian John Dick (1764-1833). Those passages can be found in ibid., 99-102.
Ultimately, for Nevin, in the modern Puritan view, the Lord’s Supper serves as a supremely appropriate occasion for the Spirit to elicit pious feelings and commitments in the believer. In commentary on an extended quotation from Yale’s Timothy Dwight, Nevin averred that modern Puritans describe Holy Communion in terms that could just as easily have been applied to a typical Fourth of July celebration: “the ends contemplated in the one case are religious, in the other patriotic; but the institutions as related to these ends are in all material respects of one and the same order.”

Nevin took care not to present a facile opposition between the objective character of the classic doctrine and its degradation into a merely or wholly subjective interpretation at the hands of these recent theologians. He acknowledged that modern Puritans have generally retained the older language—i.e., they frequently maintain that the sacramental signs truly “exhibit” and “seal” grace to the believer. He argued, however, that the sense of these terms had transformed. In their rendering, the elements truly exhibit grace, but only as a mere “figure, shadow, or sign.” They objectively guarantee or seal a spiritual transaction, but only as the ratification of a covenant “in virtue of which certain blessings are made sure to the believer, on certain conditions, under a wholly different form.”

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12 Ibid., 105.
13 Ibid., 107. Earlier, Nevin had quoted Jonathan Edwards: “the sacramental elements in the Lord’s Supper do represent Christ as a party in covenant, as truly as a proxy represents a prince to a foreign lady in her marriage; and our taking those elements is as truly a professing to accept Christ, as in the other case the lady’s taking the proxy is her professing to accept the prince as her husband. Or the matter may be more fitly represented by this similitude; it is as if a prince should send an ambassador to a woman in a foreign land, proposing marriage, and by his ambassador should send her his picture, and should desire her to manifest her acceptance of his suit, not only by professing her acceptance in words to his ambassador, but in token of her sincerity openly to take or accept that picture, and to seal her profession by thus representing the matter over again by a symbolical action” (97-98). Citing “Concerning the Qualificatory Requisite to a Complete Standing and Full Communion (Boston, 1749). Recently printed in The Works of Jonathan Edwards (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) 12: 256-58.
In other words, while some modern Puritans might profess that the Lord’s Supper
unites the believer with Christ, the unity in view cannot be considered fully real because
the unity in view it is not, in the final analysis, organic. Just as the abstraction of an
invisible church in which visibly distinct and divided parts are mentally linked is not the
same as catholic unity, attempts to explain the Lord’s Supper as the believer’s
communion with Christ’s benefits or his “divinity,” abstracted from his life-giving,
“theanthropic” person, fall short of the mystical union. In sum, Nevin concluded that
modern Puritanism was constitutionally too abstract and rationalistic to acknowledge the
depth and extent of the Eucharistic mystery.  

Summary and Analysis

Nevin’s historical narrative implied that “modern Puritanism” had replaced the
classic Reformed faith at some point during the seventeenth century. In Anxious Bench he
had warned that should the system of new measures be adopted, the old churches would
no longer be the same. Here, he implied that a similar fall from grace was already an
accomplished fact. The arid abstractions of Modern Puritanism had not only triumphed
over the classic doctrine, but had erased the memory of this conquest from Protestants’
historical imagination:

Not only is the old doctrine rejected, but it has become almost lost even to the
knowledge of the church. When it is brought into view, it is not believed, perhaps,
that the Reformed church ever held or taught, in fact, any doctrine of the sort; or if it be yielded at length that Calvin and some others maintained some such view, it is set down summarily as one of those instances in which the work of the
Reformation appears still clogged with a measure of popish superstition, brought
over from that state of darkness and bondage which had just been left behind.

In this view, the doctrine is considered to be one of no force whatever for the
church, in her present condition of gospel light and liberty. It is unintelligible and

14 For insight into what Nevin generally meant by “abstract” and “mere abstractions,” see the
summary comments from Appel, quoted in Chapter III, p. 98.
absurd, savors of transubstantiation, exalts the flesh at the expense of the spirit. A real presence of the whole Christ in the Lord’s Supper, under any form, is counted a hard saying, not to be endured by human reason, and contrary to God’s word. Thus it stands with our churches generally. Even in the Episcopal Church, with all the account it professes to make of the sacraments, few are willing to receive in full such representations of the Eucharistic presence, as are made by Hooker or Calvin.¹⁵

Strictly speaking, at this point Nevin maintained that he was merely offering indisputable historical evidence that a profound doctrinal change had taken place and temporarily bracketing definitive, normative considerations.

To raise the stakes, he added an additional historical survey in order to show congruence between the Eucharistic doctrine and practice of “modern Puritanism” and that of “rationalism and the sects” (i.e., Socinians, radical, iconoclastic Anabaptists, Unitarians, etc.). He also endeavored to demonstrate, as he had claimed in “Catholic Unity,” that the classic Reformed doctrine was in its essential features compatible with the sacramental convictions of the early church. Despite diversity of opinion, and despite the undeniable presence of views that went beyond the carefully balanced doctrine of Calvinism into Romanist and semi-Romanist errors, it is nevertheless clear, he concluded, that, “all Christian antiquity stands opposed here to the low rationalism of a merely moral virtue in the Eucharist.”¹⁶

As illustrated by Joseph Berg’s exhortation for American Calvinists to keep to the “Old Paths,” the timelessness and changelessness of orthodox doctrine seemed to be paramount for the opponents of the alleged “Romanizing” tendencies at Mercersburg. But Nevin recognized that even if his historical case had been successfully prosecuted, it could not be guaranteed to have an impact on his critics. If his historical argument was

¹⁵ Ibid., 95-96. I have broken the text into two paragraphs for ease of reading.
¹⁶ Ibid., 121.
correct, such erstwhile defenders of Protestant principle had already showed little loyalty towards historically paradigmatic Protestantism.

He concluded the historical demonstration by anticipating such objections:

The question is not to be decided, we all know, by church authority and mere blind tradition. The primitive church may have gone astray from the very start. The fathers of the Reformation were not infallible; and it must be allowed, that the life of the Reformation, in its first form, was the product or birth spiritually of the Catholic Church as it stood before, and not of the sects that broke away from it in the Middle Ages. . . . Whole Christendom may have been wrong, not only in the form, but in the very substance of its faith, with regard to the sacraments, for more than fifteen hundred years; until this modern view began to reveal itself in the Protestant world, partly in the form of infidelity, and partly in the form of a claim to superior evangelical piety. The coincidence in this case, too, may be accidental only, and not natural or necessary.17

For rhetorical effect, Nevin again pleaded that he was simply presenting the objective historical record. But he insisted that this preponderance of evidence amounted to a formidable a priori argument against the modern Puritan view.

After the historical demonstration, he presented a comprehensive theological basis for the classic Reformed doctrine in the form of a series of theses on the “mystical union.” The final section of the work consisted of a “biblical argument” for a (spiritual) real presence in the Eucharist. Here, in keeping with his Idealist commitments, Nevin eschewed the accumulation of biblical prooftexts and endeavored to show instead that the mystical union of God and humanity in and through the person of Jesus Christ is the implicit substructure that gives scripture its coherence. For our purposes the most significant aspects of lengthy second half of Mystical Presence are the emergence of the Incarnation as the “cardinal principle” of the Mercersburg Theology, and the continuing presence of discordance within Nevin’s attempt to read the signs of his times on the basis of a hope grounded in this fact.

17 Ibid., 136-137.
Development, Declension, and the Fact of the Incarnation

Nevin appended a “scientific restatement” of the classic Reformed doctrine to his historical demonstration. He believed that Calvin had been hampered by problematic conceptual dualisms and, as he (Calvin) recognized their inadequacy to deal with the Eucharistic mystery, he was forced to use awkward abstractions and explanations to overcome their limitations (namely, the hypothesis that Holy Spirit mysteriously transports the believer into heaven in order to commune with Christ by faith). Nevin was further convinced that the best thought of the age had provided tools for showing how it was not contrary to reason to claim that Christ’s “theanthropic” life (and not merely his benefits, his “divinity” or his spirit) could be really present to the believer, even while the “material volume” of his body remained in heaven. Similarly—again, following his claims in “Catholic Unity” about the first and second “Adam”—Nevin argued that with a proper conception of a real, substantial, generic “humanity” in which all individual persons participate, one could explain both how it is that Christians receive Christ’s “humanity” or “flesh” in the sacrament and why this is necessary for redemption to be fully real.

18 Ibid., 138-173.
19 Similarly, for Nevin, drawing on the psychology he first learned from Rauch, “life” was the ideal (or permanent, spiritual) principle, or “organic law” (emphasis in original) that served as the basis for the material, historical growth of actual organic entities. Thus, he believed, one did not need Calvin’s hypothesis (or, on the other hand, Luther’s notion of the ubiquity of Christ’s resurrected body), to explain how the substance of Christ’s actual divine-human life could be present across the boundaries of time and space (ibid., 139). Nevin would later modify his critique of Calvin on this point, after being convinced by August Ebrard that Calvin’s explication of Christ’s “flesh” was more subtle than Nevin initially assumed. Nevin found vindication for his own historical conclusions in Ebrard’s Das Dogma von Heiligen Abendmahl und Seine Geschichte (1846).
20 As in Anxious Bench, Nevin’s arguments employed the stock metaphors used to explain organic relations in Idealist philosophy. The “forest” came into view as Nevin attempted to explain how both the first and second “Adam” could be both individual human beings (i.e., a tree) and, at the same time, function as the personal substance of generic humanity (i.e., the forest as an extension of the single life of the one tree).
As he sought to repair slight defects in Calvin’s account of the sacramental economy without departing from its essential core, Nevin insisted that he was trying to articulate the doctrine in a form “more satisfying to the understanding” without denying the mystery to which it points. Instead, he was merely modeling the very form of authentic development in history. His modifications of the original doctrine “belong[ed] to the actual science of the present time and have a right to be respected,” even while they preserved the “true and proper substance” of the older theory. This is significant because the progressive historical outlook of this section contrasted sharply with the declension narrative of the historical argument.21

We can pursue this incongruity further by looking at Nevin’s “free compressed translation” of an essay by German theologian Karl Ullmann (1796-1865), which he included as a “preliminary essay” in Mystical Presence.22 In grand Hegelian fashion, Ullmann presented the German mediating theology as the furthest advance in the quest to distill the distinctive essence of Christianity. If the rival scholasticisms of the seventeenth century reduced the faith to doctrine, the rationalists that followed them (with Immanuel Kant their culmination) restricted the faith to its ethical dimension. By comparison, F.D.E. Schleiermacher’s subsequent insight into Christianity as grounded in the experience of redemption (the pre-rational soil from which both doctrine and morals emerge) was a profound step forward. However, according to Ullmann, Schleiermacher and his disciples ultimately failed to escape a reflexive subjectivity and were therefore unable to do justice to the reality of sin. Contemporary theological science, having learned from all these predecessors, was now able to grasp that the distinctive feature or

21 Ibid., 145.
22 Ibid., 15-39.
essence of Christianity is its grounding in the objective at-one-ment made possible through the person of Jesus Christ as the divine Word made flesh.

According to Nevin, Ullmann and the mediating theology more generally, took as their point of departure, “the ground-fact of Christianity, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” For Ullmann,

Christianity, more than before, is apprehended as life; as the life in which God and humanity are first fully united in an organic way, and thus a new principle is furnished for the restoration and completion of man's nature; and for this very reason, also, more than was the case ever before, the person of the Redeemer is recognized in its central, all conditioning, and all pervading significance, so that from this as its great spiritual heart, the Christian system is made to flow, in the living union of its parts.23

Nevin’s meditations on the Incarnation, as part of the “Biblical Argument” in the second half of Mystical Presence was in many ways an elaboration of this paragraph. There, Nevin described the human and divine, historical and supernatural, person of Jesus Christ as “the key that unlocks the sense of all God’s works,” such that “all nature and all previous history unite, to form one grand, universal prophecy of his presence.”24 Therefore, “the Christian salvation . . . as thus comprehended in Christ, is a new LIFE, in the deepest sense of the word.”25 It was neither a doctrine proposed to the intellect, nor an event to be remembered, nor was it the establishment of a new order of “spiritual relations” or “divine appliances.”26 The classic Protestant dogmatic emphasis on the

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23 The quotation is from page 6 of a reply to Charles Hodge that Nevin published as the Preface to “Antichrist; Or, the Spirit of Sect and Schism” (reprinted in The Anxious Bench, Antichrist, and the Sermon Catholic Unity, ed. Augustine Thompson, [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003 (1848)]). Emphases in original. Nevin put this passage in quotation marks, but he did not provide page references in this case. I have been unable to locate this exact quotation in the Ullmann essay (as presented in the new, critical edition of Mystical Presence). It may thus be an especially “free” translation.

24 Nevin, Mystical Presence, 174-175.

25 Ibid., 48 (Thesis #5 on the “Mystical Union”).

26 Ibid., 148.
sinner’s justification as a result of Christ’s atoning death was only intelligible on the prior basis of this “ground-fact.”

The important point to emphasize from all this at present is Ullmann’s contention that modern theological science had come to grasp the all-important significance of the Incarnation only recently. In “Catholic Unity,” Nevin had declared that the ideal Church becomes fully actual through a process of moral development requiring intelligence and will. Ullmann’s presentation (as summarized by Nevin) appears to assume a more-or-less rationally discernible, all-but-inevitable dialectical progression in the pursuit of truth.

It is conceivable that, if pressed, Nevin would have granted that “modern Puritanism” could be seen as an interim stage, a necessary but inadequate historical expression of Christianity needing to be aufheben in a higher synthesis. Yet such a judgment is not easily harmonized with the tone and mode of argument of the historical section of Mystical Presence. Nor is it consistent with Nevin’s more organic description of the true form of history as one in which “the past, though left behind in one view is always in another [view] taken up by the present and borne along with it as the central power of its life.”

27 He contended that the rise of modern Puritanism had imperceptibly and perhaps unintentionally occasioned a break with the Church’s historic consciousness of its participation in the redemptive effects of the Incarnation. It short, we can infer, he concluded that “modern Puritanism’s” abandonment of a robust theological and practical recognition of the mystical union represented a failure of Christian intelligence and will—i.e., sin.

The formal aspects of this incongruity can be illustrated via a brief look at Nevin’s use of the acorn-oak-forest metaphor to explicate the principles of Idealist

27 Ibid., 144-145.
psychology. His ubiquitous references to a process of development from “ideal” to “actual” seem to imply a linear development from origin to goal (i.e., acorn—oak). But—to broach a fundamental question raised at the origins of Western philosophy—this begs the question of the “acorn’s” origins. Is “history” best understood as a “flow” whose course we can accurately picture from the outside, as it were? Or is it an all-encompassing current whose end (and source) we cannot ultimately perceive?

For Nevin, the “acorn” of the ideal church fell from the “oak” of the Incarnation. As he stated in “Catholic Unity,” since Christ is the “organic root” of the Church, “to the end of time, [the Church] can include no more in its proper life, however widely distributed, than what is included in the root itself.”28 It follows, then, that one can speak of progress in church history only in a highly qualified way. The church’s task is simply to become what it already is, in the most fundamental sense. At the same time, however—as Nevin’s conclusions about the travails of Reformed Protestant sacramentalism seem to presume—if we eliminate the moral language of progress and decline the actual (as contrasted with the ideal) church seems to lose contact with history—and reality—as we know it.

Nevin was apparently content for the present to keep the progress of Protestant theological science on a separate plane from the convoluted moral development of the ideal church into the actual church. Though this discordance cannot be resolved, it can be partially and plausibly explained if we attend to the rhetorical context of Mystical Presence. Nevin’s narrative of historical decline had to do with his diagnosis of the Reformed churches in the United States; Ullmann’s narration of recent German intellectual history had to do with what he perceived as the discovery that the latest

speculative philosophy could be employed to illuminate the truth of certain basic Christian claims in new and fruitful ways.

As Nevin was mostly an outsider to that story, he included Ullmann’s essay with *Mystical Presence* in order to accomplish two things. First, he wanted to give additional support for his Incarnational emphasis and for the related view that Christianity is primarily to be understood as *life* rather than doctrine.

In the introduction to his *magnum opus* Nevin declared that, “the relations of this inquiry to the question concerning the true idea of the Church, will easily be felt by every well-informed and reflecting mind.”

If the fact of the incarnation be indeed the principle and source of a new supernatural order of life for humanity itself, the church, of course is no abstraction. It must be a true, living, divine-human constitution in the world . . . not a *device* or contrivance ingeniously fitted to serve certain purposes beyond itself—but the necessary, essential form of Christianity, in whose presence only it is possible to conceive intelligently of piety in its individual manifestations. . . . We are Christians singly, by partaking (having *part*) in the general life revelation, which is already at hand organically in the church, the living and life-giving body of Jesus Christ.  

In the terms of *Anxious Bench*, a proper grasp of the Incarnation and its cosmic significance explains his opposition to the system of the bench, on the grounds that “individual Christianity is the product, always and entirely of the Church as existing previously.”  

It is easy to see why Schaff declared that “Catholic Unity” was “filled with the ideas of German theology.”  However, as we saw in Chapter Two, Nevin had been saying somewhat similar things since early in his career. Some time before his formal

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exposure to Idealistic philosophy he had argued that Christianity was best understood as “life.” Organic metaphors such as “implantation” and “participation” had been part of his theological vocabulary for some time. As he insisted much later, his conception of the church question was not directly imported from Germany.\textsuperscript{32} However distasteful to the antebellum Protestant theological palate, Nevin believed that one could not get to the heart of pressing problems of “practical Christianity” without attending to such seemingly rarefied questions.

Second, as Nevin soon confessed, he was hoping to defuse potential criticisms. By reprinting Ullmann’s essay, he hoped to distinguish his own positions from Schleiermacher’s, who was rapidly becoming the \textit{bête noire} of doctrinally traditionalist American Protestants. At the same time Nevin’s bold claims certainly dared critics to respond to his historical and theological conclusions. Yet a serious rejoinder was slow in coming.

As Charles Hodge began his 1848 review:

> So much of late has been said by Dr. Nevin of the apostasy of the Reformed church; his uniform tone is so disparaging, if not contemptuous, when speaking of all the branches of that church, except his own; the charge of Puritanism and

\textsuperscript{32} "Altogether, indeed, my sense of the \textit{Church}, which has come to be active and deep, has not been borrowed in any direct and immediate way from German theology. I know of no writer there whose views in full I would be willing to accept on this subject. So far as churchly influence has been exerted upon me from this quarter, it has been mainly through the force of theological ideas . . . The later German theology has done much undoubtedly to provide right views of history, deeper appreciation of the Christological questions, more realistic conceptions altogether of the new creation introduced into the world by Jesus Christ. Its tendency, therefore, is to break up the force of our common modern spiritualistic abstractions, and thus to restore at the same time old catholic ideas to their proper force. In this way it is well adapted to make the necessity of an objective, sacramental religion felt, even beyond the measure of its own positive teaching. Only in this way can it be said to have anything to do with my particular church tendency." As cited in Linden J. DeBie, ed., \textit{Coena Mystica: Debating Reformed Eucharistic Theology}, vol. 2 of the Mercersburg Theology Study Series, ed. W. Bradford Littlejohn (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 131. (I am grateful to the editors of this new volume for providing an advance copy of the manuscript.)
Rationalism is so constantly flowing from his pen that he has reason, we think, to be surprised that all his has been so long endured in silence.\textsuperscript{33}

According to Hodge, both the length and the abstruse subject matter of \textit{Mystical Presence} made it a difficult read (“it requires the stimulus of a special necessity to carry us through such a book”). In the end, he concluded, “Dr. Nevin is tenfold further from the doctrines of our common fathers, than those whom he commiserates and condemns.”\textsuperscript{34}

\textit{From Sacraments, to Christology, and Beyond}

To address Nevin’s historical assertions, Hodge chose not to engage in independent research. Relying on Nevin’s own findings, he turned the notion of historical development against Nevin, arguing in essence that Calvin’s confusing language about the “vivific virtue” of Christ’s flesh received in the Lord’s Supper was a rare residue of Romanism left in the great Reformer. In his view, the Reformed tradition gradually left all that behind as it came to articulate a more lucid and biblical sacramental theology.

Thus, while Hodge generally claimed that theology must move inductively from biblical facts to dogmatic conclusions, he reversed methodological direction when it came to historical questions. Moving from an \textit{a priori} grasp of the true Reformed doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, he concluded that the best early summary of that doctrine could be found in the \textit{Consensus Tigurinus} of 1549, in which Calvin, seeking unity, tried to employ sacramental terminology acceptable to Reformed groups less amenable to mystical and Romanizing interpretations.


\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
Three years later, Nevin replied extensively and derisively to Hodge’s historical arguments with more than a hundred pages of rebuttal. However, Hodge was ultimately uninterested in a theory of the historical development of the Reformed tradition. He was ultimately concerned with the systematic theological consequences of Nevin’s constructive claims rather than Nevin’s probabilistic historical case against the “modern Puritan” view.

Hodge was alarmed by Nevin’s insistence that the believer’s mystical union with Christ included a sharing in Christ’s human nature. Entirely unconvinced by the Ullmann essay or Nevin’s own presentation, Hodge declared that such a view could not be distinguished from a pantheistic monism in which God and humanity, good and evil cannot ultimately be distinguished. Moreover, he concluded, not only was Nevin guilty of a Romanizing tendency, he had also followed Schleiermacher in rejecting the catholic doctrine of the Trinity. He believed this inference could be made because Nevin’s insistence that the Lord’s Supper involved a communion with Christ’s person reduced the Holy Spirit to an impersonal medium.

Claiming pastoral concern for his former student, Hodge concluded by warning that Nevin’s ideas in *Mystical Presence* would issue forth a host of errors and outright heresies. He portrayed Nevin as a rather muddled innovator—not the intrepid reformer calling for a much-needed return to the sources he claimed to be. In closing, Hodge

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35 “Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord’s Supper,” *Mercersburg Review* 2 (1850): 421-548. See also *Mystical Presence* (2012), Part II: 225-322. Later historians have generally affirmed Nevin’s basic thesis (i.e., that a substantial transformation of Reformed Eucharistic doctrine did indeed occur in the centuries following the major Reformed confessions), while noting that Nevin’s assumptions about the organic growth of a self-consistent “Reformed” position (with Calvin embodying a higher synthesis of the Lutheran and Zwinglian concerns), smoothed over too much of the internal diversity and conflicts of that history.

36 Hodge was a junior faculty member at Princeton when Nevin arrived, but it is not the case that Hodge was Nevin’s primary theological mentor.
voiced his hope that American Christians would disregard Nevin’s obscure and
dangerous rantings, so that they would be spared the fate of being “arrayed in the cast-off
clothes of the German mystics and then marshaled in bands of the ’Church of the
Future.’”  

In a brief initial reply, Nevin admitted that he had read and learned from
Schleiermacher, even if he could not consider him a fully orthodox theologian. However,
he asked, granted that Schleiermacher’s system “ran out . . . into gross and dangerous
errors,” do such errors taint everything Schleiermacher wrote, so that nothing beneficial
can be appropriated from him? Nevin took Hodge’s sweeping judgments as an
opportunity to expose Hodge’s inability to come to terms with Christianity’s historical
caracter. If “Princeton” was to apply this kind of scorched-earth polemics to all
historical theology, Nevin averred, they “might just as well denounce the whole system
of Origen, on account of its acknowledged faults, and charge these as necessary
consequences on all the great and good church fathers, who walked more or less in the
light of his powerful mind, during the fourth and fifth centuries.”

Nevin reduced Hodge’s accusations against Mystical Presence to two theological
claims. First, according to Hodge, Nevin had unadvisedly made the person of Christ to be
the ultimate fact of Christianity, rather than his doctrine or work. Second, and more

37 Hodge, “Doctrine of the Reformed Church,” 278.
38 Nevin, “Antichrist,” 4. The quotations in this section are drawn from the preface to Nevin’s
Antichrist (1848). He replied at greater length to Hodge’s charges in the pages of the Weekly Messenger
from May-August of that year. Those responses have been collected and edited for publication in Volume
II of the Mercersburg Theology Study Series, Coena Mystica: Debating Reformed Eucharistic Theology,
39 “Princeton, I would say respectfully, has been too apt to deal in this sort of logic: At one time,
all sympathy with the mind of Coleridge is denounced, because Coleridge himself was an admirer of
Schelling, and an eater of opium; at another, the pantheism of Hegel is made the burden of the sweeping
question, Can any good thing come out of Germany? . . . such indiscriminate judgments serve not, in the
end, the cause, either of religion or science” (Ibid.)
fundamentally, Nevin had made the fatal mistake of claiming that, in the Incarnation, the supernatural life of God had entered into “organic union with the life of nature, for the redemption of the world.”

In response to the first charge, Nevin insisted that a sufficient grasp of the importance of the Incarnation is necessary for giving every article of the Apostles' Creed their due. To foreground considerations of Christ’s person does not minimize the significance of his ministry, teaching, and passion. Rather, he argued, it has proved to be the only lasting way to ensure that they receive their proper value.

As for the second charge, Hodge had accused Nevin of conflating Christ’s divine and human natures. He argued that Nevin’s notion of a single “theanthropic” life was indistinguishable from the heretical fourth-century monk Eutyches’ claims about Christ’s nature or physis. Nevin rejected this on the grounds that he intended the term "life" to have the sense not of nature but of "personality." If the union of two natures is hypostatic, isn't there a common center, he asked, “What is personality, if it be capable of this broad dualism?”

Nevin concluded by arguing that it was Hodge himself who had abandoned Chalcedonian orthodoxy. Hodge's theology "carries a decidedly Nestorianizing aspect throughout,” he insisted. This is seen by the "bald abstraction" in which he treats doctrinal symbols. Swelling to a conclusion, Nevin gave a summary portrait of “modern Puritanism” as represented in its most sophisticated form by Hodge. In this deviant version of the faith, he concluded,

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40 Ibid., 5.
41 Ibid., 11.
42 The remainder of this section is drawn from pages 11-13 of the preface to Antichrist.
the Trinity is taken as a logical formula, rather than a living revelation of God through Jesus Christ. The relation of God to the world, is that of an artificer over against the mechanism of his own work. The last principle of things, is an outward decree, which it is his business to execute in a like outward way. Man is no organic whole evolving itself as a single process from first to last, but a vast multitude of living units placed on the same theatre, by successive generations, for moral trial.

The ancient Nestorian error reportedly gave a merely verbal affirmation of the Incarnation while denying the ultimate mystery of the organic unity of the divine and human in Christ’s person. Here, too—as with piety and doctrine at Princeton—a certain zeal for orthodoxy precluded a full recognition of the “inward reconciliation” of God and humanity.

Echoing his claims in Anxious Bench, Nevin asserted that in this rationalistic supernaturalism the sin of “Adam” falls on all humanity “not on the ground of any real unity of life between the parties,” but through God’s sovereign but arbitrary choice, “just as [God] might have imputed the sin of the fallen angels to men, if he had thought proper.” So, too, with the redemption of humanity: in modern Puritan hands, the Incarnation becomes a contrivance or expedient which “must be carefully held aloof from the whole process of the world’s history under any other view, lest it should lose this ex machina character.” Christ is acknowledged to have been both divine and human, but “not in such a way as to be conjointly concerned at all in the same process of birth, growth, affection, work, suffering, and death.” Since his human nature “was simply the theophanic form, in which it was thought good that the Word should at this time appear” it remains conceivable that we could have received the benefits of his passion just as easily “had God been pleased to order it in some other nature, and on some other planet altogether.”
As for all subsequent history, and for the life of the church, modern Puritanism insists that Christ’s human nature is “bound immovably . . . to the right hand of God, under the same general limitations that attach to our present existence in time and space.” As a result, Christ can only communicate with the world in his divine nature, or via the Spirit “as his substitute and proxy.” This is the crux of modern Puritanism’s rejection of the real presence and the source of Hodge’s accusation of “Sabellianism.” According to this view,

To conceive of [Christ] as present personally in the Church, *en pneumatii, under a peculiar mystical subsistence, of which the Holy Ghost is the medium, is said to involve virtually a denial of the objective personal existence of the Holy Ghost. Believers are indeed mystically united with Christ, as the Church has always believed; but only by the indwelling influence of the Spirit, as a wholly distinct agent; which moreover dwelt in good men, before Christ came, precisely in the same way, and is not to be regarded at all as coming into any new form of revelation for men in consequence of the Mediatorial mystery.

With a dramatic flourish, Nevin rested his case: “If this be Calvinistic orthodoxy, my soul, come not thou into its secret, and unto its assembly, mine honor, be not thou united.”

**Conclusion**

For the rest of their careers both Nevin and Hodge used the other as a convenient foil for clarifying their own theology and the consequences of its alternatives. Close examination of the debate sparked by *Mystical Presence* is a fruitful location from which to inquire into the theological and historical identity of Reformed Protestantism. Because of Hodge’s dismissive and bombastic charges, it is difficult for later readers more sympathetic to Nevin to take Hodge’s critique seriously. Yet Hodge was a formidable dialectician who identified the theological and practical problems to which Nevin’s necessarily less analytically precise formulations were liable.
By their very nature, systematic analyses of the Mercersburg Theology show a certain affinity with Hodge’s own methodological orientation. That is to say, they privilege a concern for timeless truths over historical contextualization. For example, despite mostly careful language, a recent survey of the Hodge-Nevin debate gives the general impression that the Eucharistic controversy was really a dispute over increasingly rarefied concepts—i.e., it moved from disagreement over the mode and nature of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper, to a technical discussion of classic Christological questions, and, finally, to the classic divide in Western metaphysics between nominalism and realism.43

But the controversy between Hodge and Nevin also clarified the very different ways in which two nineteenth-century American Protestants discerned the particular dangers of their time. Hodge threw his energies into a struggle against subjectivistic mysticism. For his part Nevin was convinced that the preeminent threat to Christianity in America was a rationalism (whether pious or impious) that denies the very ground of salvation itself in practice by denigrating and instrumentalizing the Church and all its merely “external” forms.

To reinforce the stakes of his investigation in Mystical Presence, Nevin quoted Anglican theologian F. D. Maurice:

The eighteenth century came, and the same processes that were used for shutting out the invisible in every other direction were applied also in this. And yet tens of thousands of men and women in every part of Europe, would in that day have rather parted with their lives, or with any thing more dear to them, than with this feast. And now, in this nineteenth century, there are not a few persons, who, meditating on these different experiments, have arrived at this deep and inward conviction that the question whether Christianity shall be a practical principle and truth in the hearts of men, or shall be exchanged for a set of intellectual notions or generalizations, depends mainly on the question whether the Eucharist shall or

43 This is the basic structure of Bonomo, Incarnation and Sacrament.
shall not be acknowledged and received as the bond of a universal life, and the means whereby men become partakers of it.\textsuperscript{44}

Though much can be learned from them, skillfully executed conceptual analyses of \textit{Mystical Presence} tend to obscure its character as Nevin’s response to what he perceived to be a substantially similar crisis of epochal proportions. For Nevin, by denying the mystical presence in theory (by sealing off the spiritual from the mundane, with no exceptions) and practice (by relegating the Eucharist to a helpful devotional aid, but not a unique and central act of Christian worship), modern Puritanism risked joining with anti-Christian rationalists in denying that the “bond of a universal life” had actually been made available.

The Maurice quotation is itself nearly enough to justify James Hastings Nichols’s conclusion that the Mercersburg movement could best be characterized as a Eucharistic revival.\textsuperscript{45} However, as Nevin insisted at the outset of \textit{Mystical Presence}, to attempt to retrieve a more robust sacramental practice is also inevitably to press the more controversial dimensions of the church question by raising questions about the foundations of Protestantism itself. Such a radical critique could only be justified if the church question was indeed inseparable from the “Christ question” (i.e., “Who do you say that I am?”). In the next chapter, we will examine the tract \textit{Antichrist; or, The Spirit of Sect and Schism}, the last of Nevin’s classic “Mercersburg” writings in which he engaged in yet another assessment of the state of the church question in the nineteenth-century United States.


\textsuperscript{45} Nichols, \textit{Romanticism}, 84.
CHAPTER VII
THE PROTESTANT ANTICHRIST IN AMERICA

Beginning with *Anxious Bench*, Nevin had been battling a deeply engrained assumption, expressed in the twentieth century by the Dutch theologian J.C. Hoekendijk, who asserted that, “in history a keen ecclesiological interest has, almost without exception, been a sign of spiritual decadence.”¹ Since he was himself fully committed to the promotion of spiritual vitality and “experimental religion,” Nevin’s task had been to demonstrate that only the most serious of theological considerations justified his own preoccupation with the Church. As we saw in the previous chapter, by *Mystical Presence*, and particularly after his debate with Charles Hodge, it had become clear to Nevin that the church question was inseparable from the fundamental matter of Christology.

Our treatment of the classic Mercersburg Theology ends with an examination of *Antichrist; or, The Spirit of Sect and Schism* (1848). As the theological stakes grew higher, so did the intensity and scope of Nevin’s critique. As we saw earlier, in “Catholic Unity,” Nevin referred to the Roman pope as Antichrist. Now, four years later, he discerned the spirit of Antichrist throughout American Protestantism.

*Introduction*

Though the judicial structure of the German Reformed Church continued to affirm the ministries of Nevin and Schaff, the Mercersburg Theology remained under

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attack. In a casualty of the controversy, the Dutch Reformed Church determined that their German Calvinist kin had placed their communion in jeopardy by continuing to affirm the Mercersburgers, despite the persistent questioning of their orthodoxy. As a result—in a highly symbolic repudiation of Nevin’s own call for “Catholic Unity” three years before—the 1847 Triennial Convention was cancelled.

The next year Nevin published a tract, based on a series of sermons, in which he revisited the subject of “Catholic Unity” and offered an expanded and deepened theological critique of the “sect system.” If that sermon had been a hopeful call to action, *Anti-Christ: The Spirit of Sect and Schism* returned to the agonistic tone of *Anxious Bench.* If the Nevin of *Anxious Bench* had been content to hold up a Puritan pastor like Richard Baxter as an exemplary model of authentic, churchly Protestantism, it was now abundantly clear that the course of Nevin’s argument was leading him further away from anything his contemporaries recognized as Reformed Christianity.

Nevin had earlier complained that as the system of the bench gained ascendance, all manner of questionable actions tended to be patiently and charitably assessed, so long as they could claim to be motivated by evangelistic urgency. The biblical maxim “quench not the spirit” had overtaken the equally scriptural admonition to discern spirits. In this last stand-alone text associated with the Mercersburg Theology, after nearly half decade of intense controversy, he once again attempted to discern the nature of the spirits at work in American Christianity.

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2 In 1847, Berg and other pastors from the Philadelphia Association tried once again to have Nevin and Schaff censured, if not removed. This time, the charges were deemed to be insufficiently definite and no formal inquiry was undertaken. Part of the controversy had to do with one of Schaff’s university papers, in which he appeared to endorse a speculative theory about an interim post-mortem state, somewhat akin to Purgatory.

3 Good, *History,* 304.
Nevin began by recalling that the Church has struggled from its beginning to avoid the twin dangers of heresy and schism. Though outwardly distinguishable, like the understanding and the will, they are intrinsically related. Echoing Schaff’s description of the diseases of Protestantism, he claimed that heresy is simply “theoretical schism,” while the outward act of schism is “always in its inmost constitution heretical.” Thus, both can be reduced to a common anti-Christian principle, and John the apostle gave the church “a simple universal criterion, of easy application, by which to distinguish it in every age from the Christian life in its true form.” In the words of Nevin’s Authorized Version: “every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh, is of God; and every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God. And this is that spirit of Antichrist whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.”

“Antichrist” was not a single historical figure, he clarified. It refers to a spirit that has always been present, in various forms, throughout church history. Rather than a positive substance, it remains parasitic on authentic Christianity. Therefore, Nevin claimed, just as the detection of a counterfeit requires intimate familiarity with the genuine article, an accurate description of the spirit of Antichrist can be gained only in light of a correct apprehension of Christ and the Church.

The Christian “FACT”

Nevin once again asserted that Christianity lay “deeper than all doctrine”; nor could it be reduced to set of lofty moral standards. It is, rather, a “power which is formed

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5 1 John 4:2-3.
to lay hold of the inmost consciousness of the world as the principle of a new creation . . . [not] a theory or rule, but . . . a divine FACT . . . something which has taken place in the actual constitution of the world.” ⁶ This was, of course, the “FACT” of the Incarnation. Thus, according to Nevin, John the apostle understood “Anti-Christ” to be "a spirit, nominally Christian, and so not beyond the Church but in it, which seeks to overthrow the person of Christ, by resolving it into the mere show of an incarnation, that has never had place in fact.” ⁷ To clarify his meaning, Nevin delineated several aspects of the Christian fact.

First, he claimed, it is a supernatural fact. Though an event that occurred in our actual history, the Incarnation can only be grasped by faith, as it was a sui generis event, distinct from all other occurrences that can be accounted for as the product of immanent forces. At the same time, he continued, it also challenges faith in a different way because it remains a(n) historical fact, and not a “mere passing miracle.” The Incarnation was not a case of the “invisible forced abruptly, for a season, on the sense of the visible world, and then withdrawn again into its own awful retirement.” Such miracles add nothing to the “real contents of history.” Instead, the foundational Christian fact represents “the supernatural . . . brought into real, organic, abiding union with the natural, raising it into its own sphere, and filling it permanently thus with powers it never possessed before.” ⁸ As a result, it fulfills and brings to completion the “inmost meaning” of all preceding history and quenches the desire of the nations.

Thus, he continued, the preceding claims imply that Christianity is also grounded in what could be called a world-fact. By this, Nevin meant that the church necessarily had

⁶ Ibid., 17.
⁷ Ibid., 25.
⁸ Ibid., 18.
to make universal claims for itself, as it had done from the first against “Jewish” ethnic particularism on the one hand and the false universalism of pagan Rome on the other. Thus, “we have a right to say, accordingly, that the second creation is more universal or catholic than the first . . . Christianity is the broadest and deepest form of humanity.”

Finally, Nevin qualified the preceding point by maintaining that that the Jewish insistence on divine transcendence and a limited cosmic dualism was an improvement upon pagan thought, which always ended in some form of pantheistic monism. Therefore, he added that the Christian “FACT” is a single or scandalously particular fact. In the end, all creation finds its animating center in “the power of the one and the same glorious life, the process and completion of the new creation in Christ Jesus.”

The Human Encounter with and Reception of the FACT

In an extended reflection Nevin argued that the paradigmatic human encounter with the Christian fact was recorded in the apostle Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ. The source of Peter’s surprising declaration could not be traced to any discrete act of cognition or volition or even to a “feeling” as generally understood. Rather, it occurred on an ontological level, akin to the infant’s pre-reflective immersion in its mother. “To whom shall we go but unto Thee?” is the language of such faith, he insisted.

In a later series of articles, Nevin would develop the claim that Peter’s confession represented the germ of the Apostle’s Creed, with its structural focus on the person of Christ and—so he insisted—its confession that a faith-filled response to the Christian “FACT” entails faith in the Church’s supernatural and historical nature.

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9 Ibid., 19.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 21.
12 Nevin, “The Apostles’ Creed,” Mercersburg Review I (1849): 105-127; 201-221; 313-347. The
he emphasized that a denial of Christ's coming in the flesh need not be made in so many words. Because we are dealing with an existential response to a living reality, words and deeds must exist in an organic unity. In addition, Nevin continued, since the Christian redemption is a process working holistically from within, anti-Christian tendencies may yet coexist with formally orthodox profession in the form of unrecognized implications and consequences.

In such cases, the spirit of Antichrist “appear[s] as a false theory or scheme of religion, where yet the inward force of religion is perhaps deeply felt.” Nevertheless, he warned—as with the merely apparent neutrality of the anxious bench—the anti-Christian spirit always works like a "secret leaven, that tends directly to corrupt and destroy the good life with which it is thus unhappily combined.”¹³ The inevitable result is a denial, whether direct or merely by implication or consequence, of Christ’s divinity, his humanity, or their organic union in his person.

After a tracing “general history of Antichrist” through the centuries, featuring the classic heresies of standard church histories, Nevin submitted that

It is no compliment to Protestantism, to say that there is no Antichrist, save that which has been left behind in the Church of Rome; for this must imply, as the world now stands, that Protestant Christianity is comparatively impotent, as a true revelation of the presence and glory of Christ. Where the life of Christ is mainly active, in the way of historical force, we have reason to expect a corresponding activity of Antichrist, as the spirit of delusion and error . . . the Protestant Antichrist must be sought, not beyond the pale of Protestantism, and in the posture of open opposition to its cause; but in the bosom of this cause itself, regarded as the most perfect style of the Church. He will be found, sitting in the temple of Protestantism, affecting to be no less than Christ, the Protestant Christ

Mercersburg Review, launched in January 1849 and edited by Nevin, took the Apostle’s Creed as its touchstone. It was highly significant for Nevin that the ancient Church found consensus around the organically developing creed despite its various, though slight, regional variations. By his reading, this demonstrated the Church’s shared (though perhaps inchoate) conviction that the creed’s basic shape accurately corresponded to the primary encounter with, and subsequent dependence upon, Christ’s person.¹³ Idem, “Antichrist,” 26.
himself, whose right it is to exercise supreme control in the Church, and to be worshiped and served by the whole world.\textsuperscript{14}

In short, for Nevin, the spirit of Anti-Christ is itself characterized by (parasitic) historical development. Just as the actual church can never surpass the ideal reality from which it receives its “life,” so, too, the anti-Christian spirit of heresy and schism will remain true to its character even while it adopts ever more subtle and insidious forms.

A few years earlier, John Henry Newman had published his famous \textit{Essay on the Development of Doctrine}. The essay was also, in essence, an initial apologia for Newman’s own “development” from an Anglican divine into a Roman Catholic. Taking up a standpoint remarkably similar to Nevin’s, Newman began with the hypothesis that Christianity, as a “fact in the world,” has an objective existence that is nonetheless subject to change over time.\textsuperscript{15} To a skeptical audience, Newman argued that Roman doctrinal, devotional, and structural innovations could not be ruled out on theological principle and he offered what he believed to be a preponderance of compelling reasons for their legitimacy as authentic historical developments of the apostolic faith.

In the second half of the \textit{Essay}, Newman presented a series of “notes” that could be used to distinguish true or authentic developments of church doctrine from false ones. In the second half of \textit{Anti-Christ}, Nevin attempted a similar task, but with a very different object. Since Protestantism could not be guaranteed to have vanquished the spirit of heresy and schism, and indeed should expect to encounter its presence, it was necessary

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 35.
to gather some reliable heuristics for identifying its subtle, diabolical power at work in new historical developments.  

Following Schaff’s argument in “Principle of Protestantism,” Nevin maintained that, in the United States, the spirit of Antichrist had taken the general form of a “sect plague.” He attempted to demonstrate the truth of this claim by providing evidence for something like a sufficiently compelling series of overlapping and reinforcing anti-Christian tendencies. He insisted that these symptoms represented a “transcript simply of forms of life, that can easily be recognized in every direction, as the legitimate fruit of this evil.”  

*The Marks of Antichrist*

Nevin’s twelve marks of the spirit of Antichrist did not display a remarkable degree of analytical rigor. He did not claim that the list was exhaustive, and it is not immediately clear why certain marks warranted separate mention. Many of his claims will be familiar by this point, though he did provide some new illustrations from contemporary American Protestantism and extended and clarified his arguments in some new ways. Nevertheless, since a primary purpose of this chapter is to summarize the basic features of the Mercersburg Theology and Nevin’s sense of an urgent pastoral crisis, it will be worthwhile to follow his developing presentation.

The first mark of the anti-Christian spirit at work, Nevin claimed, is a denial of the necessity for the mediation of God’s gracious, salvific gift of himself in Christ. “It is characteristic of the sect spirit,” he explained, “that it makes Christ auxiliary only to its

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16 Nevin did not acknowledge Newman’s *Essay* as an influence or model for *Antichrist*. (As the controversy over *Mystical Presence* showed, he was not averse to citing the work of controversial figures).


18 Nevin was more concrete in a lengthier treatment of this theme he wrote the next year. See “The Sect System” *Mercersburg Review* I (1849): 482-507; 521-538.
own religious life, and not properly the medium in which it moves.”¹⁹ This first mark is the key to all the others.²⁰ Therefore, Nevin’s theological development in the years subsequent to *Anxious Bench* did not involve a substantial departure from his initial, classically Augustinian, insistence that the particular must always be grounded in the general—i.e., religion must “get” the sinner so that he or she receives the assistance of a power greater and deeper than the power of the individual will and the sinful disease that afflicts it. For Nevin, while there is certainly “one God and one mediator between God and Man, the Man Christ Jesus,” (1 Timothy 2:5) polemical claims for immediate experience of Christ (e.g., advocates of the anxious bench celebrating their freedom from traditional churchly forms) are ultimately, even if unknowingly, rejections of the need for any mediator whatsoever.

Nevin’s second mark of the spirit of Antichrist is the denigration of the mystery and significance of Christ’s person. When the anti-Christian spirit holds sway, he claimed, an appreciation for the classic Christological doctrines disappears. This is followed by a lack of faith in the church’s supernatural character (third mark),²¹ and a corresponding “low” view of the ministry, sacraments, and the forms of worship (fourth mark).

²⁰ In *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), literary critic Harold Bloom argued that such a rejection of (historical, metaphysical, ecclesial) mediation is the defining feature of America’s predominant (“gnostic”) faith.
²¹ “The whole Sect system shows here its true character; for it turns throughout on the assumption, that Christ has no real Church in this world; but only an invisible spiritual Christianity, which men are at liberty to arrange and shape, by the help of the Bible, according to their own pleasure. Schism, as such, has no faith in the holy catholic Church; holds the very word for popish, and the thing itself no better than empty wind; save as it may be taken to mean its own figment of a Church, which exists objectively in the clouds only, or at best in the Bible, and subjectively in such developments of piety as are supposed to square properly with this rule” (Ibid., 41).
According to Nevin, the spirit of Antichrist also tempts Christians to show “contempt for history and authority” (fifth mark) while making a great “affectation of individual freedom” (sixth mark). In both cases, he claimed, the most insidious work of anti-Christ is to lead Christians to identify such libertarian impulses with zeal for the scripture itself. While admitting that “blind, outward authority” (i.e., “Rome”) should be rejected, he insisted that the popular American Protestant alternative of private judgment should receive equal condemnation.

Though most certainly God’s word, the Bible cannot be sundered from a reverential sense of a perpetual divine presence in the Church, he asserted, especially since Antichrist is ever ready to urge “it is written.” Furthermore, it does little good to plead the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit as a hermeneutical warrant without an understanding of how the Holy Spirit leads into truth (i.e., not apart from some organic relation to the life of the historical church). The true freedom of the Christian has a “general” character, he contended. In order to be rational and free, all individual reason and will must be “bound” and accountable. Therefore, according to Nevin, authority is as constitutive of religion as liberty: “they are opposite poles only of one and the same life.”

The next set of marks bear a number of similarities to what Nevin judged to be the spiritual instability and weakness of the system of the anxious bench. As the spirit of Antichrist gains ground, he claimed, Christians who succumb to its enticements will

display a tendency to hyperspiritualism (mark seven)\textsuperscript{23} and fanaticism (mark nine).\textsuperscript{24} Because such exalted states cannot be sustained through the power of one’s own subjectivity, Antichrist leads the unwary astray by tempting them to begin in the spirit, in such an unbalanced way that they invariably “end in the flesh” (mark eleven).\textsuperscript{25} In all these ways, the spirit of Antichrist makes its presence known by a “decidedly dialectical character.” It persuades believers to see the relation of the new creation to the old as “abrupt, violent, and chasmatic” in order to leave them trapped in a “hopeless dualism” (mark eight)\textsuperscript{26} and to replicate this same violence in the form of a spirit of endless division (mark ten).

Finally, Nevin declared that the spirit of Antichrist is marked by its “false theology” (mark twelve), though to clarify his meaning, this should be taken in two senses. In the first, somewhat tautologous sense, he believed that antichristian sects are always characterized by some Christological error that eventually displays itself in

\textsuperscript{23} “Gnosticism will know only of a Christ who comes in the clouds, or, which is the same thing, in the human brain . . . . Rationalism and sectarianism are both alike at this point; zealous for spiritual religion in opposition to a religion of forms . . . . [Yet] spiritual frenzy inevitably cools down into frigid rationalistic abstraction” (ibid., 47).

\textsuperscript{24} “The subjective can never be calm, quiet, and strong, except as it is borne upon the bosom of the objective. The spiritual has no reality for man, except as revealed and apprehended in organic union with the natural. The dualistic consciousness of the Gnostic race must ever be in itself a consciousness, at bottom, of weakness and falsehood; associated . . . . with a tinge of Manichaean malignity towards the world . . . . It is only the catholic Christianity, resting in the faith of divine powers objectively present, through Jesus Christ in the Church, that can be at once profoundly earnest and profoundly calm. The religion of Sect can never have the same character. It is unquiet, irregular, spasmodic; substitutes feeling for faith; moves always by impulse and effort; runs into excesses; alternates between extremes. Its image, at best, is the whirlwind or mountain torrent, the very violence of whose action is a symptom of their own transient nature, and an argument that their strength itself is something hollow and unreal” (ibid., 49-50).

\textsuperscript{25} “Hyperspiritualism is ever fleshly pseudo-spiritualism; that is sure to fall back sooner or later, impotent and self-exhausted, into the low element from which it has vainly pretended to make its escape. Anabaptism finds legitimate, natural end in the excesses of Munster; as Mormonism in the like excesses of Nauvoo. What a difference apparently between the inspiration of George Fox, and the cold infidelity of Elias Hicks. And yet the last is the true spiritual descendant of the first. The inward light of the one, and the light of reason as held by the other, come to the same thing at last. Both contradict the true conception of religion. Both are supremely subjective, and in this view supremely rationalistic, at the same time” (ibid., 52). Despite the quotation marks in the original, Nevin provided no information about his source here.

\textsuperscript{26} “Sects disown history. To them the past is no womb of the present in the life of the Church. Their Christianity is always to diopetes, direct from the clouds (Acts 19:35)” (ibid., 49).
practice. In another sense, sects generally undervalue theology, declaring it to be of little use and the source of many evils.

However, since what passes for theology in the sects is not a historically mediated tradition of inquiry, but is, rather, little more than a “system of mechanical abstractions, as barren for the understanding as it is cold and jejune for the heart,” Nevin could actually have taken this to be a healthy instinct. Ultimately, for Nevin, “false theology” did not simply mean “heterodoxy,” if “orthodoxy” is taken to mean correct ideas or notions, considered apart from an existential (embodied?) awareness of the Christian “FACT.” False theology consists in forgetting “that all Christianity starts in the realities of the creed . . . . There can be no surer mark of a poor theology, than this; that it has no earnest sympathy with the idea of the Church, as a divine historical reality grounded in the constitution of Christ’s person.”27

The Sect Plague and its Remedy

How exactly did this analysis apply to the actually existing churches in the United States? In “Catholic Unity,” Nevin had argued that the divided state of American Protestantism did not invalidate the churches’ separate claims to be “in Christ.” However, he urged repentance and the cultivation of “church feeling” as the only sufficient responses to what appeared to be a state of unresolvable disharmony. Four years later, he provided a much bleaker description of the churches’ plight and developed a more substantial argument for why “faith in the Church” was the only sufficient remedy for the sect plague.

Sects, Denominations, and the Church

As before, Nevin maintained that he was not declaring the various existing denominations as such to be the work of Antichrist. The problem was the “sect mind” that coexisted inside most denominations together with a true sense of the church, although it presently seemed to have the upper hand. At their best, he averred, denominations understand themselves to be only tragically and contingently necessary. That is, when a true “Church mind” prevails, denominations lament their implication in the sin of schism and are willing to envision and eager to work for the removal of boundaries to the real, visible, churchly communion of all Christians, even if it means their own dissolution.

If in the mainstream American Protestant historical imagination, the monolithic Churches of European Christendom represented something like Egyptian captivity, then contemporary denominationalism must be understood as a temporary wilderness wandering. According to Nevin, once denominationalism is taken to be natural, right, and good (i.e., “to say of the wilderness, ‘this is our home, and we will seek no other’”), it becomes indistinguishable from the sect system. Since this is largely the case, he concluded, “our denominational Christianity is fairly responsible for all the mischief of our Sectarian Christianity. We have full right to speak of the . . . sect plague of our age and nation.”

Again, just as in “Catholic Unity,” Nevin was quick to reject utilitarian arguments in support of denominational diversity and competition (a la the Federalist Papers’ advocacy of the ultimate benefits that can be derived from the presence of “factions”). Such justifications represent an embarrassing failure to grasp the theological scandal of a

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28 Ibid., 57.
divided Church. If the preceding description of the universal implications of the Christian ‘FACT’ was true, he insisted, then there can be many nations, for example, but only one Church. To suggest otherwise is to submerge the supernatural in the natural and to reject the “world-historical” or universal significance of the Incarnation.

Nevin granted the possibility of a state of affairs in which various confessional branches of the Church live in a differentiated yet authentic (read: organic) unity. However, he insisted that this was far from a description of the facts on the ground. The actually existing sects showed no sign of being animated by a single organic life principle or an inner necessity continuous with the historic Christian consciousness:

No one can say to [the sect system], "Thus far shalt thou go, but no farther." If it be right to have five Sects, why not fifty? [A]nd if fifty, why not five hundred? If a thousand congregations, willfully erecting a new ecclesiastical standard, can, as a matter of course, carry with them the full life of the Church, why may not a single congregation, or the half or fourth part of a single congregation, do precisely the same thing? Why, indeed, may I not constitute my own family into a separate "denomination," and then have no more to do, ecclesiastically, with the rest of the world afterwards than the Methodists have now with the Presbyterians, or the Covenanters with the Seceders?²⁹

The Covenanters and the Seceders were rival Calvinist communions resulting from a dispute within Scottish Kirk. For Nevin, the fact that these rival sects maintained their separateness even after moving to America, far from the original controversy, was glaring evidence of sectarian denominationalism’s absence of memory. Such amnesia makes “organic development” impossible and it precludes the possibility of a remedy for the original wounds that first brought a particular sect into being.

The same could be said about other ecclesiastical divisions, he contended. In so many cases, the original cause of division or schism is gone, but the door to

²⁹ Ibid., 59.
reconciliation and union “remains just as much closed as ever.” As he reminded his readers, the Methodists were never intended to be a self-perpetuating church at all, yet they now represent the United States’ largest Protestant denomination. In this section, Nevin rose to new rhetorical heights:

The Sect life, sundering itself from the general consciousness of the Church, may start with vast show of spiritual freshness and vigor—like a divergent stream from the Euphrates or Tigris—but only, if it continue in such separate course, to lose itself ultimately in the sand, or settle into some stagnant pool, from which it can never afterwards accomplish its escape.

... The spirit expires gradually, in the arms of its own letter; the old terminology degenerates into sheer cant; and in place of the living witness that once gave utterance to some divine reality in the denominational creed, we have before us, finally a grim statue, or life-aping automaton at best, that simply parades in dumb show a sense which it has no longer any power to understand. . . . The system possesses no principle of cure or help, in its own nature.

Nevin granted that there were no doubt a number of believers within the denominations who long for a united "Church of the Future" and an end to the wilderness wandering. Unfortunately, he lamented, such individuals are going against the grain of the reigning sect consciousness, which appeals to the seductive anodyne of a deeper and stronger, yet always invisible unity behind all superficial differences.

30 Ibid., 59. For Nevin, since both American Lutherans and Calvinists alike generally subscribed to a “modern Puritan” view of the sacraments, the heart of that fundamental Protestant divide had been removed as well. Yet a formal reconciliation was hardly imminent.

31 Ibid., 60. Again, one cannot help but wonder if Nevin had just read Newman’s description of why Christianity must be subject to historical development: “Whatever be the risk of corruption from intercourse with the world around, such a risk must be encountered if a great idea is duly to be understood, and much more if it is to be fully exhibited. . . . It is indeed sometimes said that the stream is clearest near the spring. Whatever use may fairly be made of this image, it does not apply to the history of a philosophy or belief, which on the contrary is more equable, and purer, and stronger when its bed has become deep, and broad, and full” (Newman, Essay, 40).

32 “It is not possible for a true Church consciousness to exist, as the real ground-feeling of our religious life, the whole, of which all other forms of this life are only parts, without struggling at least towards a corresponding revelation of itself in an objective and visible form. To make the One, Holy, Catholic Church, a sheer invisibility, is just to convert it into an idealistic, Gnostic abstraction” (Nevin, “Antichrist,” 60-61).
The fact that “sect consciousness” had essentially won the day over “church consciousness” could also be seen in the fact that most American Protestants were willing to equate a lack of overt inter-denominational conflict, and a state of mere friendliness, with genuine catholic unity. In fact, he continued, the cooling of sectarian hostilities can simply mean that the parties have simply become strangers to each other. A glance at the average denominational newspaper’s coverage of other denominations’ affairs will confirm the view that America’s assorted sects “have entered into different theological and ecclesiastical worlds, in which each has lost the power, to a great extent, of understanding the rest, or taking any interest in their affairs.”

Finally, he concluded, the sect mentality is fundamentally debilitated by an inner contradiction. To the extent that they retain any sense of the true Christian “FACT”—which, as he had already established, is a single and yet general, universal, or “world” fact—the sects must maintain or affect some sense of exclusivity. He described at length the typical manner in which the “sect plague” extended itself:

Here, for instance, is a new village of a thousand or fifteen hundred souls, in the far West. A single church and one faithful pastor, would be amply sufficient for all its spiritual wants. It has already perhaps two distinct congregations, acknowledging each other as evangelical and true churches. But there is a potion of "material," that does not exactly belong to either; and soon accordingly, we have an effort to establish two or three additional chapels, each floating a new sectarian banner, brought hither by missionary activity on the part of so many different ecclesiastical bodies, which feel themselves bound in consistency, to push their own denominational "interest" into every nook and corner of the land. The five Sects thus struggling to keep foot on ground, broad enough only for the use of one, can never abide in true amity and love.

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33 "An occasional shaking of hands fraternally on the platform of a Bible Society, or a melting season of promiscuous communion now and then around the sacramental board, fall short immeasurably of the true idea of catholic unity” (ibid., 61).
34 Ibid., 64.
In light of such behavior, Nevin asserted that such sectarian denominations were no longer confessions but “ecclesiastical corporations,” each seeking to further their rational self-interest apart from the fact of Christ. He concluded emphatically that these concrete manifestations of the sect plague amounted to a victory for the antichristian spirit, a “total and fatal rupture with the proper Christian consciousness, as embodied in the idea of the Church.”

Remedy

Nevin contended that American Christians must undergo a humiliating repentance in which they come to see that the sect plague cannot be overcome through any stratagem that fails to begin with faith in the Church as the primary locus of Christ’s redemptive presence. Many of these inadequate options were discussed in “Catholic Unity.” This time, the urgency of Nevin’s plea was unmistakable. His description of the only adequate response to the sect system (or its “remedy”) brings to mind the Georges Bernanos’s counsel that, “in order to be prepared to hope in what does not deceive, we must first lose hope in everything that deceives.”

First, as before, faith in the Church requires abandoning the “violent” and “unhistorical” illusion that denominationalism can be overcome via the establishment of a “no-sect sect.” Second, since the Church requires for its existence “some apprehension of a positive new creation in Christ Jesus” (i.e., the single, universal ‘FACT’), there is no hope “in a certain liberality, which shows itself indifferent at last to all religious distinctions, and overcomes the Sect consciousness by bringing it to dissolve simply in

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35 Ibid., 63.
36 As found in the epigraph to Chapter II of Jacques Ellul’s Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 47 (no citation from Bernanos provided).
the sense of our life as a mere natural whole.”

So, too, he claimed, efforts to manufacture a federal union—as in the case of the recently organized Evangelical Alliance, as well as the Americanizing Lutheran Samuel Schmucker’s attempt to devise a consensus creed to which various parties would voluntarily subscribe—remain ultimately impotent, because they make the whole the creature of its parts. However well intended, he argued, to claim such a federation as a step toward true catholic unity is a farce on the level of the Jacobins’ attempt to legislate a Supreme Being into existence.

With this conclusion, Nevin returned to the opening themes of the tract. The first and only lasting way to ward off the spirit of Antichrist lay in a renewed faith in the “ground-fact” of Christianity and the Church as its privileged visible, historical mediator. Since “schism” has no intelligibility apart from such a robust sense of “church,” he claimed (just as “sin” has no meaning apart from the moral law), preaching against divisions in the absence of such faith in the church would be vain. To ask Christians to take seriously the implications of joining and leaving a particular church connection will appear to be little more than obscurantism, an unconscionable attempt to tyrannize believers who have been set free by Christ.

In the kind of “spurious ethnic catholicity” exhibited by the Evangelical Alliance, he asserted, merely “natural” affinity suffices for unity because the visibly organized

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37 Ibid., 65.
38 Nevin was quick to note that the recently organized Evangelical Alliance consisted mainly of what he considered to be the “most violently unhistorical and sectarian” of Protestants.
39 In 1849 a minister of the Evangelical Association (a quasi-denomination begun in Maryland in the early nineteenth century by a former German Reformed pastor) asked to join the German Reformed Church and have his ordination recognized. Nevin argued that, since the Evangelical Association was not a true church, he must be re-ordained (though, as an ex-Roman Catholic, Nevin considered the same pastor’s baptism to be valid). According to Nevin, the Evangelical Association was a mere sect and not a church because it had only recently been started by an unordained layman. According to Good, “This re-ordination was made use of by the enemies of Nevinism to still further prove its Romanizing tendencies, because while the Mercersburg theologians and ministers refused to accept the ordination of the Evangelical Association, who were Protestants, they yet were loudly proclaiming their recognition of the baptism of Catholics” (History, 266).
church remains on a merely natural plane. So long as one holds such commitments, to
acknowledge the existence of the church is no different than granting that there is such an
entity as the United States Senate. As the fact of the Incarnation challenges and then
redefines commonplace notions of the “historical” as well as the “human”; so, too, with
the Church. Just as “Christ authenticates himself for faith,” genuine catholicity requires a
faith “whose very nature it is to mould [sic] the consciousness into the form of its
object.”

Therefore, it is “sophistical and false” to hide behind the host of practical
difficulties in the way of visible, catholic unity. It is also beside the point to plead that an
unassailable historical case for any visible Church’s claim to be the Church of Christ
cannot be made. To take either of these paths is to place oneself outside the standpoint of
faith altogether, he insisted.

As Nichols concludes, Nevin was confessing, “I believe in the Church . . . Lord,
help my unbelief!” For Nevin, such an honest admission of difficulty is vastly
preferable to the kind of pragmatism that is indistinguishable from despair, as it amounts
(in practice, if not principle) to a denial of the Christian FACT in its fullness. In
conclusion, he contended, though faith in the church is not all that is required to remedy
the sect plague,

it is the first and greatest thing . . . and it is idle to prate sentimentally of our good
purposes, in its absence. Half of our Sects would be at once dissolved by it, like
mists before the rising sun; while the field of division and debate, among the rest,
would be narrowed to less than half its present dimension; and, in the distance at

40 “Jesus Christ authenticates himself. And so it is, with the mystery of the church . . . Such faith
does not turn primarily on the presence of the Church, as a given corporation accredited by outward seal,
but on the idea of Christianity itself, as necessarily requiring this constitution to make itself complete”
41 Nichols, editorial introduction to “The Church” in The Mercersburg Theology, 56. It is unclear
whether Nichols was actually quoting Nevin here or not. I have been unable to locate the exact quotation.
least, would be seen rising, to the fond vision of hope, the glorious one catholic CHURCH OF THE FUTURE, as the praise, and joy, and glory of the whole earth.42

**Conclusion and Assessment**

After Antichrist, Nevin’s students and other supporters helped launch the *Mercersburg Review*, to which he contributed a remarkable number of lengthy and theologically substantive articles over the course of the next five years. However, according to his own account, we have by this point encountered all the basic features of the Mercersburg Theology, which came into existence because of an “active interest in practical Christianity” and had the Incarnation as its cardinal principle. Nevin’s polemical target expanded from the system of the bench, to “modern Puritanism,” to the general sect plague fomented within American Protestantism by the docetic spirit of Antichrist.

As we noted in the introduction, David Bebbington’s analytical account of the rather amorphous historical and theological phenomenon of Protestant “evangelicalism” in terms of a coherent set of theological and practical emphases (i.e., biblicism, conversionism, activism, and crucicentrism) provides a useful description of the Mercersburg Theology’s primary foil. For Nevin, American Protestantism had come to place a disturbingly disproportionate weight on each of these otherwise worthy matters. In *Anxious Bench*, Nevin critiqued what he believed to be the excessive “conversionism” of new measures revivalism (in the system of the bench, he claimed, “justification becomes everything and sanctification nothing”). He also denounced the inordinate pragmatism (“activism”) that reinforced the system by creating a daunting prejudice against critics.

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In addition, though he did not give it near so much explicit or polemical treatment, we have seen how Nevin’s growing sense of the methodological inadequacy of biblicism both contributed to and underlay these classic Mercersburg writings. He rejected hermeneutical strategies characterized by what he called “rationalistic supernaturalism” in which scripture merely provides a way of accessing certain otherwise undiscoverable facts, rather than serving as a medium for encounter with living, transcendent realities (or “FACTS”) that cannot be confined within common sense or determined by private judgment. Finally, as became increasingly clear, a decisive dogmatic contrast between the Mercersburg Theology and mainstream American Reformed theology was Nevin’s shift from Calvary (“crucicentrism”) to the Incarnation as the hermeneutical key for understanding what “the Christian thing” is most fundamentally all about.

Nevin certainly affirmed a necessary place for activism, biblicism, conversionism, and crucicentrism—properly understood, of course—in the Christian life. In reply to Hodge’s contention that he had exalted Christ’s person at the expense of his work, he denied that the two could only be related in inverse proportion. Nevertheless, he confessed, “Is it any more difficult to combine the two views into one system, than it is to unite the doctrinal scheme of St. Paul with the more contemplative theology of St. John?” In short, the highly polemical and embattled character of the Mercersburg Theology makes dispassionate assessment difficult.

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43 “Antichrist has faith in the Bible, but no faith in the Church; the fact of the written Record, he can embrace as truly supernatural and divine; but challenge his homage, in the same way, to the fact of Christianity itself, as a divine supernatural reality, subsisting in the Church through all ages, and it is well if he do not scorn the thought as no better than gross superstition” (Ibid., 45).

44 Ibid., 8.
Subsequent theological critiques of Nevin’s positions have tended to echo Hodge’s initial response to the Mercersburg Theology, in which he warned Nevin and Schaff that, with their embrace of German speculative theology, they risked “confounding all the landmarks of truth, of leading men to see no difference between holiness and truth, sin and defect, fate and providence, a self-conscious universe and our Father who is in heaven.” Each of these contrasting pairs could be examined at length. However, Hodge’s basic point—a concern repeated in later years—was that Nevin’s Incarnational focus, and its emphasis on mediation, turns Christianity into an amoral, “pantheistic” rationalism that robs God of transcendence and humanity of truly creaturely status.

Given his passion for catholicity (i.e., wholeness), it stands to reason that Nevin would have eagerly affirmed this programmatic statement from Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a summary of his own Christocentric outlook:

In Jesus Christ we believe in the God who became human, was crucified, and is risen. In the becoming human we recognize God’s love toward God’s creation, in the crucifixion God’s judgment on all flesh, and in the resurrection God’s purpose for a new world. Nothing could be more perverse than that to tear these three apart, because the whole is contained in each of them

Yet must be noted that, in his extended description of the Christian ‘FACT,’ Nevin’s sole reference to the passion came in the form of a rather bland assertion that “it was not possible that the divine element, thus ‘made flesh,’ should not in the end triumph over sin and hell, and thus accomplish all the grand and glorious results that are comprehended in

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45 Hodge, “Scaf’s Protestantism,” 636.
46 See for example, “What has P.T. Forsyth to do with Mercersburg?” in Alan P. F. Sell, Testimony and Tradition: Studies in Reformed and Dissenting Thought (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005): 171-210. Sell argues that Nevin’s churchly turn to the Incarnation forced him to endorse an “automaticism of salvation,” in which a displacement of the cross from the center of Christian theology eviscerates the faith’s moral dimension.
the idea of the Gospel.” In addition, taken at face value, Nevin’s contention in *Mystical Presence* that “Christianity forms no violent rupture either with nature or history” is, to say the least, difficult to harmonize with the frequent New Testament references to Christ as a *scandalon* or stumbling block.\textsuperscript{49}

A thorough examination of these issues is beyond our present scope, though they will return in subsequent chapters. As we saw in chapter three, on a more mundane level, this was the concern of all who believed that Nevin’s sweeping critique of the system of the Anxious Bench was simply and dangerously inopportune. While the worst excesses of the system of new measures certainly deserved criticism, how else could the sharpness of the gospel call to repentance and discipleship be heard but through energetic efforts to bring individuals to conversion?

The second major form of critical responses to the Mercersburg Theology can be found in the work of historians and historical theologians largely sympathetic to Nevin’s critiques. James Bratt portrays Nevin as a perceptive analyst of the most profound problems to emerge from the antebellum culture wars, though, in his view, despite all his passionate writing, Nevin had little in the way of a constructive response. Bratt argues that nineteenth-century Americans divided the Calvinist legacy in three ways, with Hodge retaining the eternal decrees (i.e., predestinarianism), Nevin keeping the sacraments, and Charles Finney retaining the church’s mandate for cultural engagement and transformation. Bratt employs H.R. Nieburhr’s famous typology in *Christ and*

\textsuperscript{48} Nevin, “Antichrist,” 19. With such statements as prooftexts, Hodge’s accusation that Nevin had succumbed to an otherworldly Eutychianism, in which the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth are evacuated of ultimate significance, gain plausibility.

Culture, concluding that Nevin shifted among several positions (most notably, “Christ above culture”), but did not follow Calvin (one of Niebuhr’s examplars) in working concretely to “transform” culture.\textsuperscript{50}

Similarly, as Mark Noll concludes his massive “social history of theology” in the early United States, he argues that, though the “evangelical synthesis” had some tragic flaws (as the Civil War would dramatically and disastrously expose), to abandon its basic framework was to doom oneself to irrelevance. The evangelical synthesis was an entirely understandable missionary response to radically new social and political conditions. It may have fallen far short of the profundity of Noll’s own acknowledged theological touchstone, Jonathan Edwards, but Christians cannot help but give thanks for the breadth and depth of popular piety and reforming zeal the evangelical synthesis unleashed.\textsuperscript{51}

Nevin’s initial aversion to the Oxford Tractarians reflected the fact that he, like most of his contemporaries, had been trained to associate high church concerns with lifeless religious formalism and an aristocratic sensibility better suited for the old world. Yet he came to insist that such concerns are beside the point. He was determined to reject the binary opposition of churchly Christianity and warm-hearted, conversionistic piety.\textsuperscript{52}

The “general” does not replace the “particular.” Rather, it provides the conditions for the possibility for individual persons to realize their vocation to life “in Christ.” As regards Christology, he insisted that to emphasize the Incarnation and the person of Christ was

\textsuperscript{50} Bratt, “Antebellum Culture Wars,” 14-15. B.A. Gerrish draws a similar conclusion, arguing that Nevin shared a lacuna with his beloved Apostle’s Creed, as both relegate the body of the gospel narratives (i.e., Jesus’s ministry and teaching) to secondary status. See Gerrish, Thinking With the Church: Essays in Historical Theology, 225-226.

\textsuperscript{51} Noll, America’s God, 443-445.

\textsuperscript{52} In light of Bratt’s critique, we could add “social witness” (for lack of a better phrase) to this list of non-negotiables. No historian has been able to provide a sufficient explanation for Nevin’s apparent silence on the slavery question in the years following his controversial advocacy for the abolitionists at Lane Seminary.
not to denigrate the significance of his teaching, ministry, and passion, but to safeguard and reinforce their true significance.

For Nevin, only a matter of fundamental concern like Christology could outweigh American Protestants’ legitimate suspicions of high church religion. In other words, he concluded, Jesus Christ himself is the gospel. He is himself the declaration that God is truly (i.e., “supernaturally”) and really (i.e., “historically”) with us and for us. This means that the gospel is not simply a declaration, but the reality itself—the “FACT.” The personal, hypostatic union of God and humanity in Christ was the model for, and source of the redemptive unity of all creation—the “bond of a universal life,” as F. D. Maurice put it.

Nevin contended that persons encounter this reality today in the form of a Church that knows itself to be dependent on the single life of the resurrected Christ and that therefore knows (and shows) itself to be a living unity through time and space. As we have seen, Nevin came to believe that the greatest practical challenge to such a faith in the novus ordo seclorum was the glaring lack of such unity among American Protestants, and, more importantly, their shame at its absence. Therefore, a complete picture of the Mercersburg Theology’s nemesis requires that we follow John Stackhouse and add a fifth characteristic—“transdenominationalism”—to Bebbington’s well-known set of evangelical distinctives.

As a protest against ecclesial provincialism, transdenominationalism could conceivably represent something close to the “church feeling” Nevin urged in “Catholic Unity.”53 As we have already seen, however, in the 1840s, transdenominationalism

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53 That said, Nevin would have certainly considered transdenominationalism, understood as a constitutive principle which presumes something like a deeper, yet invisible, unity across structural
tended to mean that American Protestants increasingly invested their hopes for palpable, visible unity (and fears of its loss) in the United States itself—as the secular embodiment of Protestant (i.e., “biblical”) principles. Again, when read in light of the church question, the Mercersburg Theology quickly becomes entangled in a host of theo-political issues. That fact that it remained a question is highly significant.

**Looking Ahead**

Taylor Lewis was a professor at the Dutch Reformed seminary in New Jersey and a classmate of Nevin’s at Union College. In his mostly positive review of the early Mercersburg writings, Lewis insisted that faith in the mystical union with Christ, so basic to Nevin’s position, remained present in American Protestantism primarily in non-didactic forms, such as hymnody—and to a much greater extent than Nevin acknowledged.54

If Nevin gradually came to see himself in the vanguard of a reformation of American Protestantism, then we can imagine Taylor as something of a Desiderius Erasmus to Nevin’s Luther. Was Nevin really going to stake everything on the church question, and in the process risk doing violence to a richly textured way of life that, despite its undeniable, even serious, flaws, nevertheless served as a viable spiritual home for countless souls?55

The Nevin-Luther analogy breaks down in at least two ways. First, Nevin significantly qualified his apocalyptic analysis. Although essentially a backhanded...
compliment, he claimed that since the spirit of Antichrist was so active within it, the true “church life” must still be present in American denominationalism. Moreover, as we saw in his 1840 affirmation of “American institutions” against the Romanist threat, Nevin himself generally assumed the providential character of the United States in a broad scheme of salvation history. In other words, there was always room to question just how seriously to take some of Nevin’s jeremiads since he was not usually offering a highly specific reform agenda.

Second, and more importantly, Nevin’s arguments actually protested against the reduction of the faith to rarefied principles adopted by atomized believers alienated from an embodied, corporate life. Lewis’s friendly critique would seem to have been a highly persuasive argument for Nevin. He insisted that a sense of mystical union remained within the less obvious levels of “modern Puritanism” because it is an essential component of all genuine Christianity—i.e. an intrinsic aspect of the Christian “life” that remained stronger than mere dogma.

However, in a brief reply, Nevin claimed that Lewis vastly overrated the degree to which such sentiment remains on the popular level. Moreover, Nevin continued, “this want of proportion between life and doctrine is itself a great evil; especially now when the strong tide of rationalistic error, arrogating to itself the title of Protestant orthodoxy, is threatening to rarefy and spiritualize the whole truth into a sheer moral abstraction.”56 In other words, he refused a choice between substance and principle. As we will see, this is precisely the choice that would continually be forced upon him. Would his Incarnational theology lead to a mediating church present within the travails of history, or merely a mediating theology that could only conjure a “church of the future”?

56 Nevin, Mystical Presence, 95, footnote 5.
CHAPTER VIII

THE CHURCH OF THE FUTURE AND THE CHURCH OF HISTORY

In 1849, Nevin’s former students and supporters launched the Mercersburg Review. During the next five years, he edited and contributed around 300 pages annually to the journal, which Perry Miller later judged to be “as sophisticated a work as America could then boast.”\(^1\) The purpose of this chapter is to show how, at this high-water mark of the Mercersburg Theology, the tensions within Nevin’s attempt to mediate the post-Reformation divide in antebellum America were on full display.

By the time he published Anti-Christ: The Spirit of Sect and Schism in 1848, Nevin certainly needed to shore up his Protestant bonafides. Although the German Reformed Church’s judicial authorities continued to protect the Mercersburg professors, their defenders had an increasingly difficult task. For some years now, Nevin had spoken at written at length about “catholic” ideas and advocated the principle of catholic unity, but apart from a few offhand and mostly disparaging remarks his writings gave little explicit attention to the actually existing Roman Catholic Church.

In 1850, after a half-decade of antagonism toward popular Protestantism in the United States, he acquired some ballast to his reportedly “Romanizing tendency” in the form of a debate with the well-known American Catholic controversialist, Orestes Brownson. Nevin’s extended attempt to defend his version of authentic Protestantism

over against Brownson’s “Romanism” exhibits the Mercersburg Theology at its most compelling and problematic. Though on the surface this debate seemed to accomplish little more than the clarification of differences, their encounter is highly instructive in another way, as both Brownson and Nevin were in substantial agreement about the critical importance of the church question. Therefore, though Brownson resolved the church question in a way Nevin did not, unlike most of Nevin’s other critics, he could plausibly claim to have come to terms with the Mercersburg Theology.

Introduction

In the second article of the Mercersburg Review’s inaugural issue, Nevin revisited Philip Schaff’s Principle of Protestantism, lamenting that his colleague’s address had not received the attention or the kind of responses it deserved in the five years since its publication. No doubt, he granted, Schaff’s call for a catholic reformation of Protestantism was “in serious conflict at various points with the current popular creed and practice.” Nevertheless, the glaring lack of any truly “scientific” replies to Schaff’s arguments cast doubt on the ability of American theology and church life to rise to a level commensurate “with the greatness of our character in all other aspects.”

Moreover, by failing to return Schaff’s “open, manly and able inquiry” in kind, the reigning “pseudo-Protestantism” betrayed the insecurity of its position vis-à-vis the hated and feared church of Rome. Far from giving aid and comfort to “popery,” Nevin insisted, Schaff had staked out the only ground on which it was possible to vindicate Protestantism at all. Yet most of his co-religionists tragically ignore, mistrust or revile Schaff, even as they cheer the juvenile efforts of the “high-toned anti-popery school.”

3 In the second issue of the Mercersburg Review, Nevin described the shortcomings of this genre
a result, he warned, Protestantism—as popularly understood—makes an easy target for the polemical weaponry of a seasoned controversialist.

Here, Nevin was referring specifically to Orestes A. Brownson, the New England public intellectual who had shocked the nation by converting to Roman Catholicism in 1844. Soon thereafter, with the encouragement and endorsement of the American hierarchy, Brownson rose to the defense of the nation’s embattled Catholics, relishing the opportunity to expose the baseless hubris and incoherence of American Protestantism. Confident in their positions and eager to illuminate their differences from “Romanism,” Schaff had invited Brownson to review his *Principle of Protestantism* and Nevin’s *Mystical Presence*.

**Partisan Hack, or Incisive Critic?**

The debate that eventually took place between Nevin and Brownson in 1850 has not garnered much scholarly interest, despite the fact that it produced nearly two hundred pages of argumentation from two of the nation’s leading thinkers. This is no doubt because Brownson’s positions appear to have had relatively little future resonance, as compared with some of Nevin’s other interlocutors. Charles Hodge’s Old School Princeton Theology is an important root of twentieth-century fundamentalism in the United States, and it remains a touchstone for conservative Protestantism more generally. Likewise, if intellectual historians tend to identify Nevin as a forerunner of twentieth-century mainline American Protestantism, they are likely to compare his

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4 For instance, Hodge’s *Systematic Theology* remains the textbook of choice in some conservative Asian seminaries that trace their origins to nineteenth-century American missionaries.
thought with another of his contemporaries, the Connecticut pastor-theologian, Horace Bushnell.\(^5\)

By contrast, it is rather difficult for later interpreters to make similar efforts to engage with Brownson’s critique of the Mercersburg Theology in detail, as Brownson presented Catholicism in an ultramontane form that non-Catholics, as well as many contemporary Roman Catholics, find difficult to take seriously. Therefore, interpretations of the Mercersburg Theology generally (and briefly) refer to the controversy with Brownson as an illustration of its mediating character and its desire for a historical development of the church characterized by the sublation of existing Protestantism and Catholicism.\(^6\) Such an approach is also in keeping with Hodge’s earlier insistence that, despite other serious problems with their writings, Nevin and Schaff could never truly be “Romanizing” since to do so would be fatal to their shared commitment to “historical development.”\(^7\)

However, Nevin’s exchange with Brownson becomes much more significant when one interprets his Mercersburg writings as an ongoing and ultimately inconclusive attempt to raise and resolve the church question—and in such a way that the question of its viability remains fully in view. Read in this manner, the most interesting part of Brownson’s response to Nevin was his claim that he had already attempted to champion

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\(^6\) Or, as in William DiPuccio’s dissertation, the “Brownson” Nevin critiqued in these articles serves as one of several dialectical contrasts used to clarify the nature of a distinctive “Mercersburg” philosophy and/or theology (“The Dynamic Realism of Mercersburg Theology: The Romantic Pursuit of the Ideal in the Actual” [Ph.D. Diss., Marquette University, 1994]).

\(^7\) Hodge, “Schaf’s Protestantism,” 634.
the cause of a Protestant-Catholic church of the future and had concluded that the effort was futile. According to Brownson, Nevin’s desire to construct a higher synthesis than “Catholicity” or Protestantism was far from novel, since “We were not, if we understand his doctrine, ignorant of it, but were detained by it a considerable time outside the church.” He informed Nevin that the reconciliation of private liberty and public authority “was the precise problem with which we were engaged for the ten or twelve years preceding our conversion . . . the key to our writings and sermonizing during that long period.” In other words, a diachronic interpretation of Nevin’s thought compels us to give similar treatment to Brownson.

With this in mind, it is important to introduce the Nevin-Brownson debate by saying something about just what kind of Roman Catholic this was who claimed to have already tried something very much like the Mercersburg Theology and found it wanting. Chapter Two portrayed Nevin—the Scotch-Irish, Presbyterian, Pennsylvanian, gentleman farmer—as a denizen of the American center, in ethnic, religious, geographical and political senses. By comparison, Brownson’s early life exhibits a much more angular and marginal character. If Nevin was vulnerable to critique to the degree that his relative privilege rendered him somewhat insensitive to urgent cries for justice, it was much harder to level similar charges against Brownson.

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If Nevin's early years were characterized by relative tranquility, Brownson struggled from the start to make his way through the world in a time and place characterized by instability and conflict. Born into harsh poverty in rural Vermont in 1803 (the same year as Nevin), he was virtually orphaned at a young age. Brownson was not brought up in anything like the settled system of "educational and family religion" that Nevin so fondly recalled from his own childhood. As his "pagan" name indicates, his family was estranged from what remained of the standing order of New England Calvinism.

Brownson moved to upstate New York as a teenager in search of better opportunities. With its rapid population growth and dramatic economic transformation, the area was an incubator for trends that would transform nineteenth-century America (e.g., industrialization and the emergence of market-oriented religiosity). Frequent, widespread and diverse irruptions of religious fervor in the region eventually created what historians have described as the “burned-over district.” In addition to a concentration of traditional Protestant organizational activity (Charles Finney rose to prominence as a revivalist here), it seemed as if the region witnessed the founding of a new religion each week.

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9 This narrative is indebted to Patrick W Carey, *Orestes A. Brownson: American Religious Weathervane* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), as well as Carey’s detailed introductions to the seven volumes of *The Early Works of Orestes A. Brownson* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2000-07).

10 His father died when Orestes was hardly more than an infant, and his mother was forced to send him to live with distant relatives.


12 He was personally acquainted with the founders of indigenous American movements like the Latter Day Saints and the Seventh-Day Adventists. One of his brothers joined the Mormons.
Shortly after arriving in New York, Brownson had something of an evangelical conversion experience as part of a revival campaign. Not long afterwards, however, he came to reject the Calvinistic theological system as morally repugnant and became a Universalist minister. For the rest of his life, Brownson continued to identify pietistic, predestinarian Calvinism as the definitive form of Protestantism.

Like Nevin, Brownson became suspicious of “Party Spirit,” though he maintained a fundamental commitment throughout his life to the more general “movement party” of humanity. During the late 1820s and early 1830s, this meant that he took his stand apart from all religious institutions as he searched for a reliable basis upon which to promote genuine progress for all—particularly the poor and working classes—amidst all the feverish and competitive activity. He was convinced that the traditional Protestant churches were in an unholy and un-American alliance with powerful interests to destroy free inquiry and the development of free institutions that would promote the welfare of the common people. After publishing favorable opinions of notorious social radicals, it was mutually agreed that Brownson was now too much of a freethinker, even for the Universalists, and he became an independent critic.

Brownson’s infidel career was brief. After reading the liberal Unitarian pastor William Ellery Channing’s *Likeness to God*, he once again began to call himself a Christian. He was now convinced that human dignity and social progress could not be

13 He first settled in Ballston Spa, NY, a short distance from Schenectady, where Nevin was attending Union College. Brownson’s first pastor, Reuben Smith, was a New Light Presbyterian very much in the mold of Asahel Nettleton, who conducted the revival campaign in which Nevin experienced his own (by his later account, awkward) “conversion.”

14 One especially contentious issue was the effort, spearheaded by northern Protestants, to prohibit the delivery of mail on Sundays, which Brownson denounced as an attempt to turn the United States into a despotic theocracy.

15 By taking hold of Channing’s ideas about the innate religious impulse (and, in a somewhat qualified sense, the “divinity”) within all humanity as he moved from skepticism back toward positive
promoted apart from a religious basis—i.e., an acknowledgement of the spiritual nature of all persons as the source of their transcendent dignity. Soon thereafter, he moved his family to New Hampshire, where he served as a Unitarian pastor while engaging in independent philosophical and theological study.

He was eventually invited to Boston, to serve there as an urban missionary of sorts. His Unitarian patrons believed that his forceful oratory and personal background made him uniquely suited to serve the many uncultured despisers of religion among the city’s growing lower classes. Seen as an ally in the struggle against the sterile ratiocinations of traditional theology, he was also invited to the meetings of the now-famous “Transcendentalist Club,” joining such notables as Bronson Alcott and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

With the publication of his *New Views on Christianity, Society, and the Church*, Brownson contributed to the “*annis mirabilis*” of Boston Transcendentalism in 1836. Here, he set forth his own mediating theological program, which called for a church of the future and had “incarnation” for a primary theme. As he put it in a review of his own work six years later, his desire was to separate the truths from the errors in, on the one hand, traditional Christianity and, on the other, its socially progressive critics who relegated the Church and Christianity altogether to the past.

The argument of *New Views* was that Protestantism had exhausted its necessary work of destruction. The Reformation had performed the humanitarian service of breaking up the monolith of historic Catholicism, whose historical relevance ended “as

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16 Among other transcendentalist manifestos, Emerson published his *Nature* in the same year.
soon as the state embodied in its organization, and in its enactments as much wisdom,
intelligence, justice, and humanity, as it itself embodied in its own organization and
canons.”\(^{17}\) Now, however, Protestantism was itself obsolete. This was because

the time has come to affirm, and to affirm with emphasis. The race is tired of
mere analysis, criticism, dissecting, which gives not life, but takes it away. It
demands a broad and generous synthesis, positive convictions, positive
institutions, and a positive mission. It would act.\(^{18}\)

In other words, he contended, in light of the widespread injustice perpetuated by the
status quo, the members of the movement party of humanity should now realize that a
new church is needed to raise the state to an altogether higher level. He predicted that this
church of the future would be based on the two great progressive principles of the unity
of God and humanity (i.e., the general truth behind the traditional doctrine of the
Incarnation) and the fundamental unity of spirit and matter. Thus, it “will realize that
equality between man and man in his material relations, that we now recognize in his
spiritual relations” by “plac[ing] the worship of God solely in the redemption and
sanctification of the race, especially the poorest and most numerous class.” At the same
time, he continued, this socially progressive church would “not be merely utilitarian. It
will not be cold and naked and barren . . . but even more spiritual.”\(^{19}\)

Brownson’s special concern for the "the poor and more numerous classes" came
to the fore in 1838 when the nation's economy took a sudden downturn. He threw his
weight behind the Democrats in the 1840 presidential campaign, writing an intentionally
provocative essay on behalf of “The Laboring Classes." In it, he called for the

\(^{17}\) Brownson, “Church of the Future,” in *Life By Communion, 1842*, vol. VI of *The Early Works of

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 75.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 71-72.
abolishment of a paid clergy (as they confer sanctity on the unjust status quo), the government takeover of banks (to break the link between money and political power), and an end to inheritance (in order to ensure something like an economic jubilee for each generation).\textsuperscript{20}

The Whigs did their best to link the Van Buren ticket with the anti-American and anti-Christian radicalism of Brownson’s essay, and many Democrats blamed him for their November defeat. Four years later, according to a popular line of interpretation, an exhausted and embittered Brownson lost faith in democracy and progress altogether and sought solace in the ancient certainties and decidedly un-democratic Roman Catholic Church. At any rate, this was a very different church of the future than the one he had been envisioning.

Though he was now the object of derision, pity, and some fascination, Brownson had a new cause to champion. He entered the Catholic Church in the same year as John Henry Newman, and the same year as the Philadelphia riots. As we saw in Chapter One, Schaff referred to Brownson’s highly publicized conversion in \textit{The Principle of Protestantism}, as a sign that the contest with Romanism in the new world would test the ultimate worth of Reformation Christianity. Schaff’s request that Brownson review the Mercersburg Theology was no doubt based in a belief that if he were to critique their writings, it would be a particularly useful way to establish and clarify their view that only Protestantism, properly understood, could lead the way toward the church of the future. As it turned out, Nevin had the first word.

\textsuperscript{20} “The Laboring Classes,” \textit{Boston Quarterly Review} 3 (1840): 358-95. In \textit{A Pilgrim’s Progress: Orestes A. Brownson} (Boston: Little, Brown, 1966), Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. concluded that “The Laboring Classes” was “perhaps the best study of the workings of society written by an American before the Civil War” (96).
As of 1849, Brownson had yet to comment directly on the Mercersburg theology and Nevin pressed the issue. Surely intending to provoke the requested response, he claimed that Brownson “understands well enough the advantage he has, in contending with those who set out by a rejection of all truly catholic ideas, as no part of the faith once also delivered to the saints.” However, he was also “sufficiently prudent . . . not to meddle with an argument [like Schaff’s] which allows to these [catholic] ideas their full force, while it vindicates . . . their true and real possession to the cause of the Reformation.”²¹ According to Nevin, Schaff had demonstrated that Protestantism “is not the nullification of Christian history for more than a thousand years; it is not a mechanical return simply to the ecclesiastical life of the fifth century, or of the third, or of the second; it is vastly more than all this.”²² Thus, Schaff’s fundamental contention—which posed a fundamental challenge to “pseudo-Protestantism” and “Romanism” alike—had to do with Christianity’s fundamentally historical nature.

Here, “history” referred to “the evolution of . . . human life, which in the midst of continual progress, remains still, with unbroken continuity, always one and the same.” As historical, then, the church will display a “steady evolution of its contents in the actual onward flow of our human existence.” Nevertheless, Nevin clarified, the church retains an “objective and enduring character” so that it remains a supernatural object of faith. Protestantism is truly historical because the Reformation was both a conservation of the best of the past and a movement to “new and higher ground.” Therefore, as Schaff had

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²¹ Nevin, “True and False Protestantism,” 104.
²² Ibid., 98.
been equally concerned to demonstrate, it also left room for the church to evolve into “something far better and more glorious than its present condition.”

Nevin granted that Brownson was well within his rights to claim victory in his controversies with such pseudo-Protestantisms who proceed from the assumption that Romanism is “purely and wholly the concoction of hell.” Yet he (Brownson) failed to see that his own church was vulnerable to similar critique. By insisting upon an original, all-sufficient deposit of sacred tradition and an unchanging outward structure of authority, culminating in the papacy, it, too, refuses to acknowledge its own historical character. The former Anglican John Henry Newman’s argument that only Roman Catholicism could be both historical (i.e., subject to development) and dogmatic (i.e., exhibiting an objective and enduring authority) was merely an exception that proved the general Romanist rule. One need look no further than the fact that Newman’s Essay on the Development of Doctrine had received no magisterial endorsement to see that Newman did not speak for his new communion.

In addition, Nevin and Schaff were quite aware that, with the encouragement of his bishops, Brownson had recently published an aggressive attack in which he argued that his fellow convert’s theory proceeded from dangerously heterodox premises. According to Brownson, anti-Christian sects are subject to historical laws of growth and decay, but the same cannot be said about the Church. In a memorable passage, he contended that Newman, in an error with grave consequences, forgets that [the Church] sprang into existence full grown, and armed at all points, as Minerva from the brain of Jupiter; and that she is withdrawn from the ordinary law of human systems and institutions by her supernatural origin, nature,

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23 Ibid., 98-99.
24 Ibid., 97.

In something of a backhanded compliment, Brownson had cited Schaff’s own definition of historical development or progress in church history as more clear and distinct than Newman’s. This was unsurprising, Brownson claimed, because such a rationalistic or naturalistic merging of the supernatural with “history” was “bold, manly, and consistent in a Protestant; it is something else in a Catholic.”\footnote{Brownson, “Newman’s Development,” footnote, p. 11.}

In one of his first \textit{Mercersburg Review} articles Nevin admitted that his sustained polemic against pseudo-Protestantism could legitimately give the impression of one-sidedness. As the church continued its historical pilgrimage, it must avoid both the Scylla of pseudo-Protestantism and the Charybdis of Romanism. Thus, he promised that he would soon turn away from the treacherous rock now clearly identified and train his focus on the perilous whirlpool on the other.\footnote{Nevin, “Kirwan’s Letters,” 263.} Finally, in the January 1850 issue, Nevin offered his critical assessment of “Romanism” in the form of an evaluation of “Brownson’s Quarterly Review.” If Brownson would not respond to the request for a review, Nevin would go on the offensive.

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This passage surely reinforced Nevin’s initial impression that Brownson was, ultimately, a partisan hack. As Nevin himself had written, in his much earlier address on the nature and evils of “Party Spirit”: “Need it be said that the spirit of Party is directly opposed to the Spirit of the Gospel? The one destroys what the other would build up . . . . Dogmas are substituted for ideas. Words absorb things. Symbols rule faith. \textit{Theology, springing from the brain only, stands forth Minerva-like in complete armor, belligerent, ripe at all times for battle . . . . The very Bible is turned into an armory. Exegesis must bend to the authority of system. Exposition becomes imposition—sense put into the text, not drawn from it . . . .}” Cited in Appel, \textit{Life}, 122. Emphasis mine.


27 Nevin, “Kirwan’s Letters,” 263.
The “Mercersburg” Critique of “Romanism”

From the outset, though acknowledging that he could hardly endorse Brownson’s embrace of Roman Catholicism, Nevin insisted that his critique was “mingled with respect.”28 In his estimation, Brownson was much more than his popular caricature, in which he was lampooned as an unstable “weathercock.” Neither stability nor change are themselves a sufficient measure of a person’s character.

It was a sad reflection on the state of American Christianity, Nevin observed, when the popular press hails the impious rationalism of ex-Catholics as a triumph for the cause of truth while holding up Brownson as a model of dishonesty and caprice.29 If Christianity is to be “unhistorical,” he conceded, “it is easier on the whole to be accepted under the Roman form than it is to be satisfied with it under any other.”30 Despite its serious problems, “Romanism” was closer to a proper apprehension of the fundamental Christian “fact” than most American Protestants were willing to admit. Therefore, a refutation of Brownson required that his specific arguments be examined more closely.

The Incarnational Form of Authority

Nevin restated Brownson’s argument for the claims of his new church in a series of five propositions. First, Christianity essentially consists in “the truth which Jesus Christ taught or revealed.” In order to receive eternal salvation, individual persons must grasp this truth by faith. Second, faith requires the extrinsic authority of witness or testimony. It is not grounded in the believing subject’s intuitive grasp of the truth (as in “knowledge”) or in a direct encounter with the object (as in discursive reason, or

29 Here, Nevin was referring to the praise being showered on Johannes Ronge, who left the Roman Catholic Church in 1844 and gathered followers in a “German Catholic” movement.
30 Ibid., 49. Nevin did not make explicit the reasoning behind this conclusion, but it is an important admission that he was not consciously trying to maintain an abstractly conceived *via media.*
“science”). Third, natural reason can demonstrate that only God can serve as a source of infallible testimony. Fourth, for this testimony to reach human intellects, it must be promulgated in intelligible propositions.

Finally, for these propositions to reach all humanity in their hermeneutical integrity, there must be an infallible interpretive authority with universal jurisdiction. Taken together, a divinely established Church with a formal magisterial office (ultimately deposited in the person of the pope as universal pastor) becomes strictly necessary. Only on this basis can the Christian faith remain in the world as a supernaturally revealed religion, bringing people into reception of a truth beyond the capacity of natural reason and a destiny beyond their natural capabilities.

Nevin critiqued Brownson’s exclusive claims for his new church on the basis of five considerations. First, they debase human nature by disregarding “our moral law of freedom” and treating persons as little more than inanimate matter, like planets bound to the laws of astrophysics, or mere animals who cannot apprehend the source and grounds of authority.31 Similarly—second—Brownson ignores that the objective truth must enter into individual minds to become authoritative for human beings. Instead, he presents the Church as an alien imposition from the beyond. Its authority is “cut off and sundered from the proper life of the subject, and in this way comes to no real union with his intelligence and will.”32 In other words, whereas Nevin had insisted in Anxious Bench that the general must precede and ground the particular; here, he charged Brownson with overwhelming or obliterating the particular or individual altogether.

31 “Place the law as an objective force on the outside wholly of the intelligence and at once you convert it into an abstract nothing. This is the natural extreme of Romanism” (Ibid., 59).
32 Ibid., 57.
According to Nevin, to assert that human freedom be given its due is not to endorse subjective rationalism. Brownson was certainly right to reject the notion of a purely unbound freedom. Therefore—third—Nevin insisted that truth must pass through the medium of humanity in its “general” character in order to be truly authoritative: “Private judgment, like private will, has no force of reason ever as private, but becomes rational only by ceasing to be private and showing itself to be truly general.”

Brownson denies this, he argued, by formally separating the Church’s teaching authority from the rest of the Church, humanly considered.

Fourth, he maintained that Brownson’s Romanism displays a consistently “mechanical” character in which God and humanity are not brought into redemptive union but merely juxtaposed. Even if a chain of deductive reasoning like Brownson provides could establish sufficient grounds for faith in the supernatural, the believer would still remain separated from the (supernatural) object of faith by “an impassible gulph [sic].”

Finally, he concluded, from first to last Brownson elevates reason above faith, or, at least, he resolves faith into logic. Since this is the case, there is in the end little difference between a post-Christian idealist—who rejects the notion of a necessary supernatural revelation outright (Nevin may have been alluding to Brownson himself at an earlier time)—and a self-described supernaturalist, like Brownson, who “by his nature assure[s] himself infallibly that he has a revelation on the outside of him” and that he can determine, in similarly flat-footed, syllogistic fashion, what such a claim means in

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33 Ibid., 55.
34 In terms reminiscent of Anxious Bench, he characterized Brownson’s Romanism as having a “magical” character, displaying “opus operatum in its bad sense” (ibid., 62).
practice. In other words, Brownson was mired in the subjective rationalism he claimed to abhor.

_Taking Stock_

A brief review of Nevin’s classic Mercersburg writings can help clarify the thrust of his critique. In _Anxious Bench_, Nevin took his stand by rejecting the notion that Christians can live by personal piety alone; rather, the church is necessary as the medium in which persons come to participate, through faith, in “the new creation in Christ.” He stressed that his opposition to new measures revivalism was simply a plea for the recognition and preservation of the Church as the only renewable soil in which authentic faith could grow. It was not, he insisted, an endorsement of spiritually lifeless formalism.

Similarly, in “Catholic Unity” Nevin claimed that the various concrete churches are necessarily one before they are empirically many, as the church exists only through a mystical union with Christ, its “organic root.” However, he argued, to be actual or real, the catholic unity of the church had to manifest itself visibly, working in and through present conditions of division. Next, _Mystical Presence_ set out to demonstrate that a Christian truly receives the divine-human person of Christ (and not merely his “divinity,” “spirit,” or “benefits”) in the Eucharistic elements. Only such a robust explication of the Lord’s Supper could do justice to the nature of redemption as more than a legal fiction but, rather, as the gracious provision of new life to a human race alienated from God and itself.

This summary recalls two prominent and intimately related themes of the Mercersburg Theology. The first is Nevin’s emphasis on Christianity as essentially “life,” which was a direct challenge to Brownson’s initial premise that Christianity is most

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fundamentally supernaturally revealed truth. As we have seen, it would be inaccurate to interpret this as a denigration of, or distaste for, traditional doctrinal statements. Despite the ubiquitous references to the “unreal abstractions” of his opponents, Nevin was not inherently suspicious of metaphysical propositions. On the contrary—and this is the second feature that needs to be noted—his concern was to ensure that such claims (e.g., the Christological affirmations [and denials] of the Council of Chalcedon) do indeed speak of a real reconciliation between the transcendent God and the created world of time and space.

These considerations are important for addressing a potential source of confusion in Nevin’s arguments. Ultimately, Nevin believed that “Romanism,” as presented by Brownson, formally precludes a direct encounter with God. In this case, he argued, “we have . . . a faith that has to do . . . not with the supernatural at all . . . but only with the natural shoved in as a supposed intermediate witness in its name and stead.” The problem is that Nevin seems to use the term “mediation” and its derivatives in an equivocal fashion. On the one hand, “faith” is “the substantiation of things invisible, immediately and directly, as they are in their own nature.” Yet, according to Nevin, it is “Romanists” and pseudo-Protestants who reject the fundamentally mediated character of Christianity as part of misguided attempts to uphold divine transcendence and the supernatural character of faith.

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36 In other words, despite his differences with both Brownson and Hodge on whether Christianity is first “doctrine” or “life” (and despite the perception that Nevin was something of a precursor of modern or “mainline” Protestantism in the United States), it would be difficult to argue that Nevin exhibited the kind of embarrassment about, or refusal of, traditional metaphysical claims that led John Milbank to contend that the “pathos of modern theology is its false humility.” See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 2nd. ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006 [1990]), 1.


38 Ibid. Emphasis mine.
It appears that, for Nevin, one encounters Christ “immediately” only in a manner congruent with the way God has actually reached out to humankind in creation and salvation. And, since the Incarnation is first of all an occurrence in the world and not an idea, human persons truly encounter God in Christ only through the kinds of mediation appropriate to creaturely (i.e., material, social, historical) existence. Unwilling to give these implications their due, he believed, “modern Puritans” resort to an invisible church, a merely spiritual (rather than mystical) presence in the Eucharist, and a mechanical notion of biblical inspiration in which scripture’s authors become little more than the passive recipients of dictation from the Holy Spirit.

In each case, Nevin concluded, concepts provided by the abstractive powers of the reflecting individual mind serve as the real media of grace. In a formally identical manner, he contended, Brownson’s “Romanism” interposes an abstractly infallible Church, which could only be the product of speculation, between the believing subject and the supernatural object of faith. Before concluding, then, Nevin gave his critique some concreteness by addressing the question of papal infallibility. This was a particularly timely subject, as Pope Pius IX was rumored to be on the verge of defining the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary as church dogma.

*Faith in Christ and Authority in the Church*

Nevin’s problem with “Romanism” was clearly not that it gave a demonstrably human institution like the church such centrality and authority in the Christian life. Rather, he objected to the way Brownson treated the church as something of a necessary truth of reason, apart from consideration of its relation to the primary object of faith.
itself. For Nevin, “faith starts . . . in Christ. Because we believe in him, we believe also the Holy Catholic Church, and not in the reverse order.”

We can anticipate some objections here: Was Nevin taking his stand after all with Schleiermacher’s version of the Protestant principle, in which individuals come to the church through Christ and not vice-versa? Or, by formally separating faith in Christ from faith in the Church (or, as some Protestants might insist, the Bible), was Nevin not taking “private judgment” to another, more mystical level, with the individual’s particular discernment or experience of Christ apparently serving as the final court of appeal?

Nevin would have claimed that these charges presume a false choice. The Church is only an object of faith “through [Christ] and from [Christ],” he insisted. At the same time, one only encounters Christ as one encounters the Church, as it is uniquely empowered to present Christ to the world “under a truly living and historical form . . . the form in which his life completes itself among [humankind].” Since it was entrusted with and empowered for such a critical task, Nevin was willing to describe the Church as “an indefectible witness to the truth.” However, he continued, “her indefectability is a moral fact, not a physical necessity, made good through the activity of the general life itself, working out its own problem in a truly human way.”

Presumably, the “problem” to be worked out was the question of authority. Though he did not use the term, Nevin’s criteria for discerning Christ’s authority within the Church can best be described as aesthetic. The Church as a whole will remain in the truth, but only as it conforms to the incarnational pattern of revelation itself:

Why should not the supernatural in this form be quite as accessible for the *donum fidei* as when exhibited or propounded in a purely outward and abstract style?

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39 Ibid., 71.
40 Ibid.
Nature, we know, is not grace. This pertains to a higher order. But why may not the higher order reveal itself through the very life and constitution of the lower, supernaturalizing it for its own ends, as well as in an abrupt outside way; in such sort as to be for faith still all the authority that is needed, to place it in the infallible possession of Christ’s word?41

In a substantial concession, Nevin did not rule out a special papal prerogative in principle. Instead, he merely pressed Brownson to ask whether authority in his Church operated in anything like the way his argument presumed.

If the case required only an outward oracle on the one side, and implicit passive obedience on the other, how has it happened that the authority after all is not offered, in every case, in the most direct and universally accessible form, for all who read or hear at any moment without the possibility of mistake? This, we all know, is not the case. . . . It is one thing to affirm that the Church is indefectible, as the pillar and ground of the truth, and another thing quite to predicate infallibility of all her judgments and decisions in an abstract magical way. . . .42

To reinforce this point, Nevin pressed Brownson to explain why Pius IX was presently consulting with bishops and asking for the prayers of the faithful as he contemplated defining this new doctrine. Was such caution and apparent care for due process necessary if the pope indeed possessed the kind of extrinsic authority Brownson claims? It seemed much more likely that “[infallibility] is conditioned after all by the working of the universal mind of the Church, it is a result of the concrete life of the Church, and . . . it belongs thus to the process of history and must bear also a truly historical form.”43 Nevin rested his case on the grounds that “there is no safety in the mind of the pope, any farther than it is to be found to hold in living communion with the mind of the universal church, and of this no assurance can be had by the common Christian, without active, waking, and earnest attention on his own part.”44

41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 73.
43 Ibid., 74.
44 Ibid., 72-73.
Summary

Above all, Nevin believed that Brownson had rightfully rejected subjective rationalism while wrongfully embracing its equally unpalatable opposite of reactionary authoritarianism. Thus, he concluded, Brownson saw no choice but to submit his faith to the Church, understood as an infallible “outward authority.” In all this, he remained “true to the genius of his church,” since “Romanism” treats Christianity as “an outward fact, entrusted for safe-keeping to its own hands.”

Moreover, he repeated, such a view requires the principled rejection of historical change. Brownson insists that Protestantism in toto is a sham and has the gall to ask readers to believe that the Reformation and its consequences added nothing positive to the world or the Church. “Like every other good Romanist,” Nevin observed, “Mr. Brownson has his fixed idea here, and shows himself a perfect Hegelian in requiring it to underlie and rule the construction of history from first to last.” Just as “vulgar Protestantism” rejects a millennium or more of its own past, Brownson writes off modern history as a giant mistake (since, in Nevin’s view, Protestantism now clearly served as the primary channel of historical development). If pseudo-Protestantism must learn how to do justice to Catholicism, “Romanism” and Brownson himself must likewise “learn to find some sense, and not mere Devil’s play, in the Reformation, if they expect to be heard respectfully in the scientific world.”

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45 Ibid., 46.
46 Ibid., 47. However, as Nevin himself noted, Brownson did not dismiss modern history in favor of an idealized Middle Ages. Brownson actually condemned nostalgia for medieval Europe among his fellow Catholics (though he patronizingly claimed that it is understandable for frustrated Protestants to indulge in it).
47 Ibid., 45.
Once again, Nevin remained content to demonstrate the deficiencies in rival answers to the church question while leaving the precise details of a constructive alternative for another day (e.g., where does one locate, or how does one discern the “mind of the universal church”? what does “active, waking, and earnest attention” on the part of the common Christian involve? etc.). By this point, he was satisfied that he had done enough to “convict the general Roman principle of falsehood, by showing it to run into untenable consequences and to be at war with the true conception of our life.”

Responses

Nevin’s article had the desired effect, and Brownson fired off a lengthy reply. The contest then entered a second round in which each devoted an additional article of his respective journal to a rebuttal and counter-critique of the other. Their extended exchange mainly served as a forum for clarifying differences, most of which had to do with incompatible methodological inclinations and metaphysical assumptions. Since Nevin essentially accused Brownson of being a mirror image of the rationalistic supernaturalism of Charles Hodge’s Calvinist orthodoxy, it is unsurprising that Brownson’s response shared many of Hodge’s complaints about the constructive theological section of *Mystical Presence*.

_Nevin the Pantheist (Again)_

Like Hodge, Brownson accused Nevin of a mystical subjectivism that was ultimately indistinguishable from pantheism. More precisely, he had concluded, Nevin

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48 In his commentary on the Matthean account of Peter’s confession in *Antichrist*, Nevin attempted to side-step centuries of controversy by claiming that Jesus promised to build the Church “not on Peter’s person, apart from his confession . . . but not on Peter’s confession either . . . apart from his person.” The “rock” is therefore properly understood as “Peter in Christ, as the representative especially of the whole apostolic college . . . the confession of Peter as centered and poised now on the supernatural fact . . . Peter’s confession, not as an abstract doctrine, lying beyond himself, but as constituting here the inmost fact of Peter’s own life” (Nevin, “Antichrist,” 21).

was an “emanationist,” who presupposes that God only becomes real in and through the process of creation “ad extra.” According to Brownson, this basic metaphysical (more precisely, ontological) error displayed itself throughout Nevin’s work. In Nevin’s hands, Christianity is no longer a supernatural faith transcending natural human comprehension. Nevin treats “faith” as the innate human apprehension of super-sensible realities, rather than the grace-infused virtue by which the believer is raised to a higher plane in order to perceive a supernatural object of faith. In short, by failing to respect divine transcendence, Nevin’s polemic against what he called abstract (or rationalistic) supernaturalism amounts to a claim that “faith springs from the life of believers, not the life of believers from faith.”

Nevin explicitly disavowed the pantheism and emanationism with which Brownson had charged him. He was only conscious of trying to uphold the “pure living theism of the Bible,” and “recogniz[ing] fully the distinction between the natural and supernatural, and the necessity of revelation for the purposes of religion.” His intention had never been to submerge religion and morality into merely human capacities and aspirations, but, rather, to avoid the equally disastrous metaphysical error of deism, in which God does not maintain any historical relationship with God’s creatures. What Brownson interpreted as a claim that the believer or moral subject is actually the source of faith or the objective moral law was simply an attempt to acknowledge the self-consciousness and deliberative capacities that distinguish human beings from the rest of creation and that make possible a particular intimacy with their creator. For Nevin, rather

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50 Brownson, “The Mercersburg Theology (I),” 61. This is, of course, virtually equivalent to Nevin’s own critique of the “System of the [Anxious] Bench.”
52 Ibid., 309.
than a great chain of being, with humanity placed somewhere in the middle, Brownson’s form of supernaturalism seems to reduce creation to a two-story universe, since it ignores “that mind is not matter; that morality is not nature; that the law of freedom, to be different from the law of blind necessity, must come to its actualization in the world.”  

As for the charge that his notion of faith was inescapably subjective and eliminates the supernatural altogether, Nevin conceded that testimony was necessary for faith to be sure of its object. However, testimony (whether in the form of miracle accounts, fulfilled prophecies, or the pronouncements of church authorities) can never serve as the ultimate ground of faith. In his original criticism of Brownson’s “rationalism,” Nevin had claimed that faith is not extrinsically related to reason, and he described faith in such a way that it includes the discovery of an interiority more inward than the self, or than mere sense-data can disclose: “Christ authenticates himself for faith, not by mere outward warrant and seal of any sort, but by direct communication, in some way, with the rational nature of men as being himself indeed the life of reason and the only true light of the world.”  

As we saw in Chapter Five, Nevin’s clash with Hodge had a decidedly Chalcedonian tenor, with each antagonist accusing the other of Christological heresy. Here, too, Nevin insisted that he was trying to avoid confusing or conflating the respective natures and roles of God and the world, authority and freedom, as well as an equally heterodox schema in which these fundamental realities remain absolutely divided and separated. Yet Brownson was exasperated by what he considered the consistent and telling vagueness that characterized Nevin’s presentation. The Mercersburg theologian

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53 Ibid., 315.
54 Nevin, “Brownson’s Quarterly Review,” 69-70. The motto of the Mercersburg Review was fides quaerens intellectum.
made much of his intention to avoid going “too far” in acknowledging the relative autonomy of the believing subject, but was he capable of determining how far is “too far?” Nevin’s apparent aversion to “clear, distinct, and definite statements,” seemed to show that he was beholden to a “logic that is more convenient than conclusive.”

Brownson followed Nevin in combining chivalric respect with no-holds-barred criticism. He described Nevin as “almost the only direct opponent we have ever had that we did not feel it a sort of degradation to meet.” Furthermore, he claimed that the Mercersburgers “present Protestantism in as plausible a form as it admits.” However, as with his earlier claim that Schaff had presented a better case for historical development than John Henry Newman, this admission ultimately amounted to little more than a backhanded compliment, as Brownson did not really believe it was possible to do justice to Protestantism in the way Nevin insisted that he must.

*Providence and the Reformation*

For Brownson, the consequences of Nevin’s novel attempt to vindicate Protestantism were on full display in Nevin’s claims about the undeniable historical significance of the Reformation. He was decidedly unimpressed with Nevin’s insistence that the sheer magnitude of Protestantism made it the “central channel” of modern history. Rather than a vast, coherent, historical “fact” that could be traced directly to divine intention, Protestantism was for him “nothing but what is in individual minds and

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56 Brownson, “The Mercersburg Theology (I),” 51.
hearts.” Therefore, “we see nothing unphilosophical or irrational . . . in supposing that so considerable a number of persons as there are Protestants should fall into error and sin.”

As for Nevin’s more nuanced claim that Protestantism was simply an interim stage on the way to a higher form of the Church, Brownson asked—in a repetition of one of Nevin’s own arguments against “unhistorical” Protestants—“are the works of God destined to prove failures?” Even more to the point, “are we to suppose that God’s church needs mending, or that, if it does, he cannot mend it without taking it to pieces?” In other words, to assert that the violent division of the Church was a by-product of necessary historical development is to turn God into a capricious monster and to flirt recklessly with the specter of amoral nihilism.

It would not be too strong to say that Brownson believed that the entire theory of historical development had diabolical consequences:

We do not believe in the modern historical optimism, whether propounded in the dry abstractions of Hegel, or the brilliant eloquence of . . . our friend the reviewer. We believe there is sin in the world, and that history records crimes, events which have not been approved by God, and which are no indication of what he wills men should believe and do.

For Brownson, a Christian understanding of history allows for the presence of all manner of human waywardness, but it insists that God will ultimately “overrule” evil for good (as will no doubt occur in the case of Protestantism, he added).

Again, Nevin pleaded that all his claims about the divine presence in “history” amounted to nothing more than an attempt to distinguish “biblical theism” from Deism. “By being free,” he insisted, “[history] does not cease still to be God’s act, and in this view a process of self-explication, by which [God] comes forth from the depths of

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57 Ibid., 88.
58 Ibid., 88.
59 Ibid., 87.
eternity into the syllabled speech of time . . .”60 He had no sympathy for Brownson’s persistent dismissal of the Reformation and all that followed directly in its wake as a comedy of errors with no ultimate bearing on the Church.

Yet, as we have seen, particularly in the previous two chapters, Nevin’s accounts of the aftermath of the Reformation often took the form of a declension narrative. At the outset of his response, Brownson seized upon Nevin’s concession that, should such a choice be forced upon him, Romanism was ultimately preferable to pseudo-Protestantism. To Brownson’s mind, this amounted to a tacit admission that his position was also superior to “those minor and less solid forms [of Protestantism] that have never been able to make themselves generally acknowledged by Protestants themselves.”61 In short, a fundamental problem with the Mercersburg Theology, and its attempt to vindicate Protestantism as the truly historical form of Christianity, was its novel and theoretical character. For all Nevin’s talk about the necessity of the church’s manifestation in a real, historical, social body: where was his Church, here and now?

As we have already seen, Brownson also claimed that in another sense the Mercersburg Theology was hardly novel, since he had also championed a similar church of the future before becoming a Catholic. Nevin had reason to dismiss this as little more than condescending bombast. He had already mocked Brownson’s arrogance as a new convert turned Roman Catholic apologist. Citing various articles from 1845-49, he claimed that readers of Brownson’s Quarterly Review were regularly treated to something of a farce masquerading as serious critique of the nation’s leading thinkers. According to Nevin, in each episode of this serial melodrama, Brownson emerges from every battle

60 Nevin, “Brownson’s Quarterly Review Again,” 314.
unscathed, while his Protestant and post-Protestant opponents, “in their most profound attempts to get at the intrinsic reason of things, simply go over ground which was familiar long since for his feet, but which a logic still deeper than theirs compelled him afterwards again to abandon.”  

Such comments make it even more noteworthy, then, that when unresolved aspects of the church question became almost unbearable for him a few years later, Nevin exchanged several personal letters with Brownson; this time as an “anxious inquirer” rather than confident polemicist.  

While certainly not conclusive, this is evidence that even if Brownson did not win Nevin as a convert, his response planted or cultivated seeds of doubt in Nevin’s mind about the viability of his approach to the church question. Was Brownson indeed able to come to terms with the Mercersburg Theology in a way that few, if any, Americans could?

In his recent biography Patrick Carey makes clear that Brownson’s writings at the time of his debate with Nevin did not generally reflect his mature philosophical and theological opinions. Upon his conversion in 1844, Brownson abandon the arguments that had led him into the church, as they were now considered to be unsafe. Thus, for roughly the next decade, he employed what Ralph Waldo Emerson denigrated as his proclivity toward “logic-chopping” in the vocabulary of scholastic, ultramontanism. Several years later, he returned to a modified version of his earlier, more transcendentual

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63 The letters are available in the Brownson Collection at the University of Notre Dame library.
64 See Carey, Weathervane, chapter 6, “The Kingdom First: A Convert’s Zeal, 1845-1849.” The extent to which Brownson did this begrudgingly, at the order of his bishop and confessor, John B. Fitzpatrick, is not completely clear. Carey presents evidence that part of Brownson’s animus toward Newman (and the other Oxford converts) had to do with the fact that they were not required to abandon their former theories in a similar fashion. However, Brownson also believed that a clean break with his intellectual past was a necessary consequence of his decision to cut himself off from the American society he had known by becoming a Catholic (ibid., 158).
theological method, which did not fix the boundaries between the subjective and objective, faith and reason, “nature” and “grace” with such precision.  

This supports Brownson’s contention that Nevin’s arguments were restating many of his own earlier views. However, Carey also observes that had Nevin and Brownson discussed the same matters at a different time, some fundamental disagreements would have remained. A thorough assessment of Brownson’s claim to have already tried something virtually identical to the Mercersburg Theology and found it wanting is hardly possible here. Yet for the sake of comparison we can briefly identify some striking similarities and basic differences that help explain both why Brownson could justifiably claim to be intimately familiar with the church question and why he resolved it in a way Nevin did not.

**Brownson’s Catholic Tendency and the Church Question**

After the American public responded to his 1840 essay on “The Laboring Classes” with a “universal shriek of horror,” Brownson continued to wrestle with fundamental theological, philosophical, and political questions, and he maintained his concern for “the poorest and most numerous classes.” Carey attributes Brownson’s eventual turn to Rome as a combination of three factors. The first was the intellectual conversion occasioned by his encounter with Pierre Leroux’s philosophical doctrine of

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65 More precisely, Carey describes Brownson’s fundamental philosophical-theological doctrine of “life as communion” as a blend of moderate traditionalism and moderate ontologism. For a description of these minority Catholic theological schools in the context of the increasingly hegemonic status of neo-Thomism, see Gerald A McCool, *Catholic Theology in the Nineteenth Century: The Quest for a Unitary Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977).

66 Carey, ibid., 211-214.

67 Brownson adopted this phrase from the *Saint-Simonians*. His primary philosophical guides had been French ex-Catholics who retained an emphasis on “the social,” in their attempt to explicate in philosophy and political theory what they believed was the outdated mythical language of Catholic doctrine. As on a previous occasion, Brownson appropriated certain *avant-garde* ideas while moving in the opposite direction from their authors (i.e., from post-Protestant Transcendentalism toward Christian supernaturalism and, eventually, Catholicism).
“Life as Communion.” For Brownson, Leroux’s synthetic philosophy seemed to point beyond the modern philosophical dichotomies of subject and object, spirit and matter; and the social, political, and religious face-off between anarchic individualism and the despotism of both socialism and majoritarian democracy. Brownson was convinced by Leroux’s claim that to live is to “manifest,” which, in the case of all except God, requires an object. “I” require something that is “not me” simply in order to live at all. As a result, in a real, literal sense, what we call our “life” is never our own, but the product of our communion with God, humanity, and the creation.

Second, Carey contends, against some earlier Brownson biographers, that despair over the prospect of American democracy was not the decisive catalyst for Brownson’s dramatic change in outlook. Rather, it was a kind of midlife religious conversion. A new, experiential insight into what he called the “freedom of God” led him to conclude that God “is near us, not merely in the fixed and uniform laws of nature, but with us in his Providence, taking free and voluntary care of us, and tempering all events to our strength and condition.” He was now confident that God was “not a resistless fate, an iron necessity, inaccessible to human prayer, which no tears, no entreaties, no contrition can move; but a kind and merciful Father who hears when his children cry, and is ready, able, and willing to supply all their wants.”

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68 Brownson had certainly been trying to reconcile all these things for a while (as we saw above in the summary of New Views). However, following Leroux, he considered his earlier attempts to be merely eclectic, rather than synthetic—the product of following a merely subjective, psychological (e.g., a distinction between the “spontaneous” and “reflective” reason, derived from an attempt to examine the “facts” of consciousness), rather than truly philosophical, method.


70 E.g., Arthur Schlesigner, Jr.

71 Carey, introduction to vol. vi of Early Works, 3-4.

72 Brownson, “Reform and Conservatism,” in ibid., 90.
In an 1843 essay, Brownson claimed that a truly religious understanding of progress in history is threatened by the pantheistic reduction of God’s providence to a one-time ontological intervention in creation that cancels out both human and divine freedom. We live and move and have our being in God, he granted. But “pantheist history” can only account for this third dimension. It can explain timeless truths, but it cannot account for all that is “exceptional, variable, individual, diverse.”

In light of his newfound faith in the freedom of God, Brownson reinterpreted Leroux’s philosophy of communion. According to Leroux, all people live by direct communion with other people and by indirect communion with God. Yet rather than assuming, like Leroux, that progress would occur as people realized greater communion through these natural means, he now believed that a philosophical doctrine of life as communion rendered the idea of original sin an eminently plausible description of the human plight, since no person could live above the level of the objects of their communion.

Therefore, he concluded, humanity needed a “mediatorial life” that could restore its now-lost genuine communion with God. Combined with his new faith in a personal God able and willing to provide such a gift, this led Brownson to embrace traditional Christian orthodoxy, but now with a decidedly Catholic, churchly accent. Because Jesus’ mediatorial life was “literally, really, not by way of example, representation, or imputation, the life and salvation of the world,” it enters into human history “by virtue of a communion between Jesus and his disciples, and to the rest of mankind in time and

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space only by communion with them.” As we have seen, Nevin would express the same ideas just a few years later almost verbatim, particularly in “Catholic Unity” and Mystical Presence. Such notions were certainly in circulation at the time, at least for some, but simply to label them “Romantic” without further specification would be to invite impressionistic reactions rather than clarity of understanding.

A final contribution to Brownson’s new outlook was the clarity brought by his aversion to a series of lectures delivered by his fellow liberal Unitarian, Theodore Parker. For the Brownson of 1842, Parker’s articulation of a sharp distinction between “absolute religion” and its “transient” concrete manifestations represented an uncomfortably close approximation of the views he had held for the past decade. Apparently, despite the fact that moving closer to something like the Mercersburg Theology prepared the way for his entry into the Roman Catholic Church, Brownson saw too much of the same in Nevin’s arguments eight years later.

The Transient, the Permanent, and the Church

Parker’s “A Discourse on the Permanent and the Transient in Christianity” was largely an attempt to digest the impact of D.F. Strauss’s recent decidedly non-traditional portrait of the historical Jesus. According to Brownson’s summary, Parker claimed that the task of the present hour was to welcome disruptions that would raze the foundations of all but the only reliable basis for piety and progress. This absolute religion, the source

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76 In an 1842 journal entry, the quintessential American Romantic made this somewhat bemused observation about some of his contemporaries: “The young people, like Brownson . . . [et al.] . . . think that the vice of the age is to exaggerate individualism and they adopt the word l’humanité from Le Roux and go in for ‘the race.’ . . . The same spirit in theology has produced the Puseyism which endeavors to rear ‘the Church’ as a balance and over-poise to the Conscience.” Journal N (1842), in The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson, vol. 8, 1841-1843, ed. William H. Gilman and J.E. Parsons (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1970), 249. Cited by Carey, introduction to vol. vi of Early Works, 16.
of all genuine morality, was nothing more or less than a living awareness of one’s utter dependence on an ineffable, transcendent reality.\textsuperscript{77}

For Brownson, Parker’s proposals were very close to his own earlier views. Thus, with great alarm, he concluded that Parker’s “almost tragic” discourse amounted to this:

Jesus fell back on God; on absolute religion, absolute morality; the truth its own authority; his works his witness. The early Christians fell back on the authority of Jesus; their successors on the Bible, the work of the apostles and prophets; the next generation on the church, the work of the apostles and fathers. THE WORLD RETREADS THIS GROUND. Protestantism delivers us from the tyranny of the church, and carries us back to the Bible. Biblical criticism frees us from the thralldom of Scripture, and brings us to the authority of Jesus. Philosophical spiritualism liberates us from all personal and finite authority, and restores us to God, the primeval foundation, whence the church, the Scriptures, and Jesus draw all the water of life wherewith they have filled their urns.

To all this, Browson responded, “but when we have retraced this ground, and left behind us the church, the Bible, and Jesus, what shall we have then?” Apparently, he continued, the wellbeing of humanity “shall consist in the knowledge of the fact, that ‘THE SOUL IS GREATER THAN THE CHURCH.’”\textsuperscript{78}

The later Brownson certainly did not believe that Nevin was claiming anything like this. However, his argument against Parker’s claim that his absolute religion was the source of historical progress could easily be extended to an aspect of the Mercersburg Theology.

Put simply, despite Nevin’s constant references to “life” and “organic development,” the Brownson of 1842 would have judged Nevin’s abstract axiom, that the

\textsuperscript{77} Parker acknowledged his indebtedness to Schleiermacher.
\textsuperscript{78} Brownson, “Theodore Parker’s Discourse” in vol. vi of \textit{Early Works}, 369. Cf. “All Mr. Parker means, by the restoration of the soul to God, is its restoration to itself, or rather the leaving to itself alone, to its own resources, with nothing to aid it upward in its way to heaven. And his absolute religion is absolute solely because it is indefinite, means nothing in particular, in fact nothing at all” (ibid.).
particular must be grounded in and preceded by the “general,” to lack the genuinely progressive dynamism of “life as communion.” According to Brownson, only objective supernaturalism, and not mystical naturalism, could give any hope. This was because progress consists in “growth” and not merely “development.” Therefore, as he responded to Parker, he gave Nevin’s favorite metaphor for organic development an important twist. The acorn does not become a full-grown tree simply through its inevitable realization of the Idea of an Oak; rather, it requires the addition of (or “communion with”) light, oxygen, nutrients in the soil, etc.  

Nevin’s Mercersburg formulations did not rule out Brownson’s concerns on principle (e.g., his concern for “true revivals” based in something deeper and stronger than the subjectivism of the anxious bench is not far from Brownson’s advocacy of genuine progress). A helpful way to summarize the different accents they used in articulating these matters is to conclude that Nevin was most concerned with life as communion (i.e., “mystical union”) and Brownson with life (i.e., change, progress) by communion. The practical implications of these different emphases were evident in Brownson’s contrast between Parker’s “absolute religion,” and what he believed to be the true idea of the Church.

Continuous Inspiration

Quite aware that his critique of Parker would get him portrayed as a reactionary, Brownson insisted that he was as much a fighter for liberty and progress as ever. Yet he had learned through difficult experience that progress tended toward greater order. In short, “liberty must be organized or it is license, and ordained by authority or it has no basis, no safeguard, no guaranty.” Therefore,

79 Ibid., 329.
In the name, the sacred, the soul-stirring name of liberty, in which name we feel we have some right to speak, we demand the rehabilitation of the church. *Humanity needs, and has a sacred right to an authoritative church* that shall inspire a love of mankind, and command all men to labor for the upbuilding and extension of God’s kingdom on the earth—a one catholic church, clothed with supreme authority over all matters pertaining to human life, whether spiritual or material.\(^{80}\)

This church would be characterized by unity, universality and—the matter Nevin generally affirmed but rarely addressed concretely—contemporaneous authority:

“through the church we have a *continuous inspiration*, not original and immediate, but derivative and mediate, yet full and authoritative.”\(^ {81}\)

Such a church would invest all its authority in the promulgation of the only creed that can be embraced by all authentic social radicals: “UNION and PROGRESS, the mutual solidarity and continuous progress of the race.”\(^ {82}\)

There is for us no liberty, and no real advance, but on condition of our having such an authority. We need it. We need an authority back of us that shall make the hard, stony-hearted man of the world tremble before his ill-gotten wealth, and feel that he must disgorge his hoards, and give himself and all he has up to the service of God and man . . . a power that shall overawe your selfish demagogue, your ambitious politician, seeking power but for his own aggrandizement . . . . The church should subject to its severest discipline, or mark with the deepest brand of its utter condemnation, the false-hearted senator, or the base magistrate, who, under pretense of raising the wages of labor and benefitting the working man, will recommend or support measures, which tax the poor for the rich, and which do necessarily make the poor poorer and the rich richer. . . . When the outward, visible organization comes to be the real expression of the true catholic church, we shall have a church that can and will exercise this power of disciplining its

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\(^{80}\) Ibid., 383. My emphasis.

\(^{81}\) Ibid., 374.

\(^{82}\) Or, “SEEK TO BE SAVED FROM SIN, AND TO SECURE THE BLISS OF HEAVEN HEREAFTER, BY DOING THY BEST TO CREATE A HEAVEN FOR ALL MANKIND ON EARTH . . . . This, let men say what they will, is in substance the genuine, the authentic creed of the church of Christ in the nineteenth century, the only creed that men feel themselves bound to obey, that they have no right to call in question; and it is the only creed that has not ceased to make proselytes. The so-called churches of Christ are the real, living body of our Lord, so far forth as they adopt this creed, enjoin it, and command obedience to it” (381-82).
disorderly members—its members who forget the rights and interests of humanity—to the fullest extent, and with the most salutary effect.”

Articulating some of the very positions he would critique six years later, Brownson insisted that authority is to be located in neither pope nor reason but “CHURCH.” Individuals have the right of judgment to the degree that they are “in union with the church” and not willfully separated from it.

Brownson even provided his own succinct statement of the church question. “The problem of our age,” he announced, is to find “CATHOLICISM WITHOUT PAPACY, on the one hand, and LIBERTY WITHOUT INDIVIDUALISM on the other.” In the meantime, he concluded, this was now the “day of the Second Advent.” Protestantism was on its way out (“the last 300 years have seen the failure of individualism”), and Catholicism died during the papacy of Leo X. Like his fellow New Englander Roger Williams two centuries before him, Brownson believed that God would have to re-found the church.

Why, then, did Brownson eventually become a Roman Catholic rather than maintain this expectant posture? If we refrain from reductively psychological

83 Ibid., 383.
84 Ibid., 384. “We do not assume that the individual may never dissent from the Church. All truth is sacred and authoritative. He who has it has a right to entertain and promulgate it, whether it agree with the church or not. But whoso puts forth doctrine in opposition to, or different from those of the church, does it at his own peril, and can find his warrant for so doing only in the truth of his utterances. . . . The prophet is superior to the priest, but then he must be a prophet—show that he speaks by divine commission, by revealing a life above the life of the church, which in Christendom, to say the least, can rarely happen” (380-81).
85 Ibid., 363.
86 “Now the Son returns . . . not in a body . . . [but] in the clouds of heaven . . . a pure disembodied spirit, seeking a new body, for the old is dead and buried in the tomb of the past. The church then is now not formed, but in a state of formation; and our ministry, instead of being that of pastors and teachers, is that of apostles and martyrs. The House of the Lord . . . is not yet rebuilt, and there is no publicly recognized altar at which we can minister” (383-84). “We must found the CHURCH OF THE SECOND ADVENT. We must preach Christ crucified to the ‘Jews’—the members and supporters of old organisms . . . and to the ‘Greeks’—the wise men of this world, supporters of naturalism, relying on their own resources” (384).
87 Ibid., 363.
interpretations, a simple answer is not available. But on the basis of the preceding discussion we can say that, unlike Nevin, Brownson did not believe that the “mediatorial” life of Jesus remained present in any substantial way in the Protestant denominations. It also seems clear that he eventually became convinced that it was more in character with God to have provided a church whose unity and claims to authority would endure through time, rather than to let it fall into ruins.

Conclusion

In a memorable portrait of Brownson, Nevin declared that, after identifying a fundamental choice between “law from within” or “law from without” and choosing the latter, his antagonist

... seems resolved to follow [this conclusion] to the death. As he tells himself somewhere, his soul recoils from the mortal sin of being inconsequent. ... Has it become thus a maxim of reason with him, to obey with unquestioning faith the Roman Church? He will be rational then in such style, to the full end of the chapter. He will allow no sort of compromise with any rule besides. He will play the very Yankee himself in this new game; he will be a Puritan Romanist, making a king still of his own mind, and willfully forcing his very will itself, to fall in with the new theory of faith he is thus brought to embrace ... It shall be his reason here to silence reasoning, and his will to have no freedom whatever. 88

Nevin mixed regional prejudice with theological principle throughout the development of the Mercersburg theology. It was “modern puritans” who devised the “system of the bench,” 89 and who evacuated the Eucharist (and, by extension, the church) of its robust sacramentality, and Nevin had come to mistrust them in both their doctrinally conservative and socially reformist forms. Similarly, it was Brownson’s “New England

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89 “Finneyism is nothing but Taylorism reduced to practice; the speculative theology of New-Haven realized in common life” Idem, “Anxious Bench [2nd ed.],” 59.
mind” that reduces salvation to “a process that goes like clockwork” in which “the operation of the machine is all settled.”

In spite of all his references to Protestantism’s progressive character, it is easy to interpret Nevin’s characterization of Brownson as the product of a classic anti-modern conservative or traditionalist. Nevin both inherited and acquired an animus toward what he perceived to be the flat-footed, imperialistic rationalism of New England, which assumes that the human intellect can run roughshod over enduring realities such as venerable religious traditions and the natural world itself, reshaping them in its image. Thus, by his reading, Brownson was a kindred spirit with the money-grubbing speculators, aggressive and bombastic religious entrepreneurs, speculative and obscurantist predestinarians, and wild-eyed radicals produced or influenced by his region.

Nevin’s consistent complaint against Brownson had to do not with his faulty logic but with his refusal to face concrete historical facts. This was also, and ultimately, he believed, an Icarus-like failure to respect certain fundamental limits, since “to be out of history is to be out of humanity.” Therefore, an ahistorical Christianity could have nothing to do with real life. To Nevin’s mind, a great “fact” like the Reformation (and Protestantism’s subsequent influence on the emerging modern world) could no more be ignored as a turning point in the history of humanity than the existence of the Alleghenies or the Mississippi River could be removed without fundamentally altering American geography. Therefore, if the Incarnation was the source of history’s telos in the new creation, it must surely, by some mystery of providence, have borne the Reformation in its stream.

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91 Ibid., 62.
Brownson believed that Nevin’s flaccidity on the crucial question of where to find a reliable, universal authority corresponded with a quietistic indifference to injustice. At a minimum, Nevin simply took social order, and its benefits for the poor and more numerous classes, for granted. For Brownson, this was tantamount to conflating providence with an impersonal force that transcends good and evil, rather than the God of justice. Real communities need an authority that can be identified and that can speak on behalf of moral truth. Humanity had a “sacred right to an authoritative church” because God had (not out of necessity, but of freedom and love) made the world for progress. It appears that Nevin simply took for granted that there was an organic link between the Incarnation and the great “fact” of Protestantism. This had something to do with his intuitive sense that American democracy generally represented a real advance in human social relations. More importantly, it would seem that Nevin could have never entertained Brownson’s “Romanism” so long as it required him to believe that he did not begin to enter into a mystical union with Christ upon his baptism into the Middle Spring Presbyterian Church. Yet as the next chapter will explore, he failed to find an ultimately satisfying way of explaining how this was so.
Our aim is not war but God’s free truth in the spirit of love and peace. We need no angry voice, to remind us of the vast achievements and high merits of Puritanism. All that is fully and constantly before our mind. We need no outward advocate to urge the force of its peculiar claims. We know what they are, by inborn constitutional sense. The hardest Puritan we have to do with always, is the one we carry, by birth and education, in our own bosom. But the misery of it is, for our quiet, that the Catholic is there too, and will not be at rest. In other words, we are forced to do homage to both tendencies, and have no power, like many, to resign ourselves wholly to the separate beck of one.

—Nevin, “Puritanism and the Creed” (1850)

As I observed at the outset of this study, in a formal description of “what is called the Mercersburg School of Theology” written in the 1860s, John W. Nevin forthrightly acknowledged that the movement was beset by a sense of “vast practical embarrassment.” The preeminent churchly theology among American Protestants had painstakingly identified a number of dilemmas while offering precious little in the way of answers when it came to the church question—the “problem of problems for the present day.” Nevertheless, he insisted, the Mercersburg Theology had brought before the American reading public “facts and principles” that had a right to attention, “regardless of the difficulty of their practical application.”

This final chapter examines the point in Nevin’s career in which these difficulties became notoriously apparent. In what follows, I shall contend that a thorough analysis of his troubles belongs at the heart of any historical and theological assessment of this signal example of the “Catholic tendency in American Protestantism.” Some additional exposition is needed to introduce this argument, which brings to a close this examination of Nevin’s quest to resolve the church question.

Overview: Nevin’s “Dizziness”

In the summer of 1851 Nevin announced his intention to resign from Mercersburg Seminary at the end of the next term, citing a desire to relieve the penurious institution from further financial burden. It was clear, however, that his sense of professional duty was only one among several factors influencing this decision. Soon afterward, his colleague Philip Schaff explained to the readers of a German-language newsletter that Nevin had “conscientious doubt whether he was, just now, the man suited to educate the theological youth for the service of a Protestant denomination, while the whole Church question was undergoing a radical revision in his mind.”

A year later, Orestes Brownson wrote to inform Nevin that he had been heartened by some of his recent writings (Nevin remained the editor of and primary contributor to the Mercersburg Review through the end of 1853). In light of these articles’ contents, Brownson reported, he and many other American Catholics were now earnestly praying for Nevin’s spiritual welfare and, ultimately, his conversion to the truth of their Church, which they now saw as likely.

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3 Nevin shared a similar correspondence, during this same period, with James A. McMaster, another Catholic convert, and editor of the New York Freeman’s Journal.
Nevin thanked his former opponent for his concern and admitted that he was indeed in a different state of mind than when they had last encountered each other. The confident Protestant polemicist was now an “anxious inquirer” who “write[s] generally under no inconsiderable pressure and pain of spirit.” He conceded that

My Protestantism . . . is of the poorest sort. I am no longer fit for the defense of its interest in any vigorous style. . . . I find so much of the truth and right on your side, and so much of falsehood and wrong on ours as usually held, that I have no heart for controversy of the sort, and dread being betrayed by it into the misery of making common cause with principles and tendencies which all good Protestants no less than Catholics are bound to oppose and hate.

It was now Nevin’s own prayer that “if this way of yours be in fact the glorious vision which gladdened the hearts of saints in the beginning it may not remain hidden to me.”

As of yet, however, this request had not been granted. Moreover, he continued,

. . . all this negative difficulty with Protestantism is no positive conversion to Catholicism. . . . Where a whole habit of thought, kept up for many years, is to be set aside, in favor of another altogether different, it becomes very hard to distinguish between intellectual conviction and the force of mere custom as such. My general posture is not so much that of any distinct issue with Catholicism, the solution of which might carry the whole question for my understanding, as it is one rather of inability to bring the question to any such issue, a state of perplexity and doubt which I am not prepared yet to bring to an end.4

As I noted at the outset, Nevin did not ultimately become a Roman Catholic, and he remained in the German Reformed Church until his death in 1886. Yet, after 1853, when he resigned the remainder of his official responsibilities in Mercersburg (including the presidency of Marshall College), Nevin wrote little theology for public consumption, especially when compared with the literary fluency and polemical intensity that characterized his Mercersburg years.

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4 John W. Nevin to Orestes A. Brownson, Aug. 18, 1852. Brownson Archives, University of Notre Dame.
He did not entirely retreat from public conflict, however. In fact, the most lasting ecclesial impact of the Mercersburg Theology was the liturgy for the German Reformed Church introduced in 1857, to which Nevin and Schaff contributed a great deal.\(^5\) An extended controversy over this liturgy eventually split the church and led to the establishment of alternative educational institutions (Ursinus College and Seminary in Collegeville, Pennsylvania). This time, unlike the initial controversy of the mid-1840s, a substantial portion of the denomination, including many of Nevin’s former allies, had become convinced that that Mercersburg Theology represented a betrayal rather than a recovery of the classic, confessional Reformed faith.\(^6\)

These opponents pejoratively characterized Nevin’s period of marked ecclesial uncertainty in the mid-1850s as his “years of dizziness”—a label that subsequent scholarship has retained.\(^7\) To his critics, Nevin’s dizziness was proof positive that the Mercersburg Theology was structurally unsound and could not be trusted to maintain the high ground of Protestant principle. Nevin had earlier criticized the American Protestant “sect system” for having no capacity to make a clear declaration of “thus far, and no further,” that could arrest its centripetal momentum. Likewise, for these critics, Nevin’s ecclesiological waffling confirmed suspicions that the Mercersburg theology could not provide a clear line of defense for keeping the hierarchical usurpations and decadent superstitions of “popery” at bay.

\(^5\) Nevin was initially reluctant to lead the liturgical commission, as he was unsure that the denomination was ready to receive what he would propose. Nevertheless, once persuaded to accept the position, Nevin forged ahead with his vision of what a coherent liturgy, grounded in an incarnational theology and pervaded by an “altar feeling,” should be. For an excerpt from the Mercersburg-inspired liturgy, see Nichols, ed., *The Mercersburg Theology*, 260-281. For discussions of the liturgical controversy see, *inter alia*, Nichols (Romanticism, 281-307), and Hart (*High-Church Calvinist*, 199-223).


\(^7\) The original source for this description is Good, *History*, 312.
Though they acknowledge this chapter in the story, later scholars have generally downplayed the significance of Nevin’s crisis in the mid-1850s for understanding the “Mercersburg Theology” as a whole. Without ignoring the specific theological matters that were vexing Nevin both during and in the years immediately preceding his “dizziness,” when explaining his relatively early retirement (Nevin was in his early 50s) and the mental anguish he confessed to Brownson, biographers have tended to emphasize the cumulative stress produced by intense and extended theological controversy and Nevin’s extraordinary service to the denomination and its educational institutions.  

For a decade, Nevin had led Americans in keeping up with the latest European theological scholarship, while articulating and defending a unique theological perspective in debate with some of the nation’s leading scholars and his vociferous popular critics. All the while, he had served his adopted denomination by filling the role of its chief theologian, by occasional preaching in the struggling local congregation and by overseeing two educational institutions—teaching classes, raising funds, striving to recruit and retain able faculty to a remote outpost at meager salaries, and filling in other instructional gaps himself (in the late 1840s, he had to brush up on his mathematics to teach in that field). By the early 1850s, Nichols contends, only Nevin’s extraordinary efforts and sheer force of will and personality had kept Marshall College “above the level of a country academy.” Before his retirement, Nevin entered into negotiations to move the school to Lancaster, where it would gain a more solid footing by merging with

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8 Appel recorded that by the early 1850s Nevin had become convinced that his health was failing him and he did not have long to live (Life, 439). Thus, as others have noted, Nevin seems to have believed that he was giving himself greater freedom to determine the church communion in which he would die. (Nevin made clear, in his incomplete autobiography, that the “dyspepsia” which first afflicted him as a very young adult remained a continual ailment throughout his life).

9 Nichols, Romanticism, 192.
(Lutheran) Franklin College (the seminary would eventually relocate there as well—as did Nevin and his family in 1855).  

In sum, leading historical accounts of the decline of the Mercersburg Theology from its height of public notoriety place a great deal of interpretive weight on evidence that makes Nevin’s dizziness seem less like a crisis of conscience and more like a case of what we would today describe as professional burnout. In B.A. Gerrish’s assessment, which was dependent on Nichols’s *Romanticism in American Theology*, Nevin “was suffering from what is commonly called a ‘nervous breakdown.’ From the symptoms described we should no doubt infer today that it was, more exactly, a depressive breakdown, induced partly by sheer exhaustion.”  

This verdict on the strictly theological dimension of Nevin’s dizziness—which is generally echoed throughout much of the secondary literature—could be paraphrased like this: “An overworked John Nevin had for some time been pressing strange and challenging notions—Eucharistic piety, historical consciousness, and ecumenical concern—upon nineteenth-century American Protestants, most of whom were not yet ready to entertain, let alone embrace, them. As with many pioneers and prophets, the pressures of heated opposition and a desire for dialectical clarity rather tragically pushed him into adopting positions and expressing sentiments that later, sympathetic Protestants would find extreme and unnecessary.”  

Such a conclusion is consonant with the view noted in chapter II—i.e., Schaff, and his increasing “optimism” about American Protestantism, represents the most

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10 As Hart notes (*High-church Calvinist*, 139), the impending merger was yet another factor explaining Nevin’s resignation. While Nevin was in full support of the move, he was mindful of the fact that the new board’s composition would make it highly unlikely that he would enjoy the same degree of support and protection from critics that he had received in Mercersburg.  

attractive face and the most mature (or chastened) voice of the Mercersburg Theology from the perspective of later (particularly twentieth-century) ecumenical Christianity. In the end, the implication is that the kind of ecclesial uncertainty Nevin articulated is best understood in terms of pathos rather than logos. Thus, when describing the differences between the two leading Mercersburg theologians on the church question, Nichols observed that Schaff “did not share Nevin’s deep emotional repudiation of Protestantism and showed no signs of attraction to Roman Catholicism.” And again, “Schaff at this period was probably under the ascendancy of Nevin’s powerful personality, identifying himself with Nevin’s theology but anxious about an emotional orientation he did not share.” 12 Again, this interpretation echoes Charles Hodge’s initial assessment that the Mercersburg theologians could never truly be “Romanizing” without a fundamental alteration of their core principles—especially the commitment to “historical development,” which can easily be conflated with “optimism.”

It is possible, however, to give due consideration to the above factors without obscuring the fact that Nevin continued to think clearly about the implications of his Christological, incarnational convictions in the midst of personal anguish. 13 In what follows, I shall argue that Nevin’s Hamlet-like hesitancy to bring the church question to a theoretical resolution should not be reduced to a failure of nerve brought on by exhaustion. To the contrary, a close examination of the reasons Nevin offered for his

12 Both quotations are from Romanticism, 219. Emphasis mine.

13 Rather than rendering such an inquiry superfluous, a psychosomatic interpretation of Nevin’s struggles can allow theological and broader socio-cultural historical analysis of Nevin’s dizziness to be an important task. In No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), T. J. Jackson Lears describes late nineteenth-century intellectuals who suffered from “neurasthenia,” which he defines as an “immobilizing, self-punishing depression” stemming from "endless self-analysis" and "morbid introspection" (47, 49). Crucially, Lears argues that neurasthenia was a cultural syndrome, a response to larger (cultural, economic, social) forces at work during the nineteenth century, and not merely an individual pathology.
dizziness shows them to be consistent with basic commitments of the “so-called Mercersburg theology” itself, making his intellectual vertigo a consequence of theological integrity, however troubling the implications of such a claim might be for the Mercersburg Theology and all who share its hopes for a “Reformed (or Evangelical) Catholicism.”

To make this case, I will present key steps in the progression of Nevin’s thought from his critique of Brownson’s “Romanism” in 1850, to his transformation into an “anxious inquirer” two years later. Next, I will show that, while Nevin regained sufficient peace of mind and soul to remain a member and minister of the German Reformed Church in good conscience, there is compelling evidence for believing that the strictly theological dimension of his dizziness remained intact. Finally, to support this somewhat speculative historical claim, I will briefly argue that there is a direct correlation between Nevin’s inability to bring the church question to a satisfactory resolution and his equally inconclusive consideration of the classic scholastic inquiry into the ultimate divine motive for the Incarnation.

In a direct contrast with later biographers, J.I. Good, an ideological heir of Nevin’s denominational opponents, argued that at the time of his resignation from the seminary “Dr. Nevin’s logic nearly carried him off his feet.”14 As we have seen, Nevin’s (theo-)logic had as its leading idea the “fact” of the Incarnation. Ultimately, then, at the heart of Nevin’s dizziness was a nineteenth-century American Protestant’s unfulfilled quest for a way to maintain, if not reconcile, the tensions between the fact (or “FACT”) of the Incarnation and the facts of history, which included a profoundly discordant history and a disturbingly divided Church. This examination of the pivotal crisis for the

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14 Good, History, 312.
Mercersburg Theology begins, therefore, with a look at yet another of Nevin’s attempts to assess the status of the church question in light of the condition of the contemporary churches.

Losing Equilibrium

In the late 1880s, as Theodore Appel was preparing to write the first biography of Nevin, Philip Schaff—now at Union Seminary in New York—wanted to make clear his role in the Mercersburg Theology and to distance himself from some of his former colleague’s positions.¹⁵ Schaff insisted to Appel that the historical record should reflect the fact that he himself “never was Romanizing.” What is more, from his perspective, the Mercersburg Theology “took a wrong turn” in 1851, beginning with the publication of Nevin’s articles on “The Anglican Crisis” and “Early Christianity.” We begin with the first of these articles, published in March 1851, which precipitated a series of historical-theological investigations that led directly to Nevin’s dizziness.

“The Anglican Crisis” and the Four Options

The “Anglican Crisis” had two components. The first was the so-called “Gorham affair.” In 1850, the British parliament intervened to overrule the Bishop of Exeter, Henry Philpotts, who had refused to install George Gorham in a new vicariate after determining in an interview that Gorham did not believe in baptismal regeneration. In response to what they believed was an astonishing capitulation, a number of leading Anglican clerics, including future Archbishop and Cardinal, Henry Manning, resigned and entered the Roman Catholic Church. Nevin’s article assumed that the celebrated case had attracted such widespread attention that his American readers were already familiar with the

¹⁵ Good also claims that, during the late 1840s and early 1850s, Schaff (unfairly) took much of the blame for the “Romanizing” at Mercersburg—in particular, the several students who left and became Roman Catholics (ibid.).
details. It also assumed that this highly publicized ecclesiastical scandal had as its contemporary counterpoint the public outcry over the reintroduction of the Roman Catholic hierarchy to English soil in 1850 after an absence of three centuries.\(^\text{16}\)

Nevin described the Anglican crisis as “historical” in the specific sense that it pointed beyond itself to an “actual movement in the world’s life, the development of tendencies and principles into new results of general and lasting force for the nation and the race.”\(^\text{17}\) What, precisely, was at stake? It was not, he insisted, merely a matter of the particular point of sacramental principle upon which the Bishop of Exeter had taken his stand. Nevin did not himself believe in baptismal regeneration, though he did insist upon the presence of a special grace in baptism that placed the candidate directly “in the way of salvation.”\(^\text{18}\)

At bottom, the Gorham case involved “the whole conception of sacramental grace in any form, as an objective mystical and supernatural virtue going along with the holy sacraments.”\(^\text{19}\) The fundamental question at issue here was: does Christian faith entail belief in the presence of supernatural, redemptive agencies mediated through the Church, or not? In other words, the aftermath of the Gorham case would likely determine, perhaps for good, whether any part of Protestantism could arrest the tendency toward the desacralization of the Church and its sacraments that Nevin had identified in *Mystical Presence* (though, in that instance, with specific reference to the Eucharist rather than baptism). It was apparent to his mind that a crisis of apocalyptic proportion was at hand.

\(^{16}\) For more background, see Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church* [Part I] (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).


\(^{19}\) Nevin, “The Anglican Crisis,” 371.
Soon, the rush of events would require everyone to clarify first principles and ultimate loyalties.

Although he believed that the crisis was precipitating a fateful either-or decision, at the close of the lengthy article Nevin concluded that there were at present four discernible ways to resolve the church question. The major points of Nevin’s commentary can be organized under the headings of these four alternatives. According to Nevin, in light of these recent developments, a Protestant like himself could: abandon churchly Christianity altogether; reconcile with Rome; abandon all hope for either Protestantism or Catholicism and wait in hope for a new divine dispensation; or, finally, maintain the by-now familiar theory of historical development, in which Protestantism, despite its present travails, will serve as the main vessel from which a higher, better state of the church will eventually emerge.

**Option One (Making Peace with the System of the Bench)**

The first possibility, according to Nevin, is for all Protestants to embrace “antisacramental Baptistic Independency.” This would involve concluding that the only remedy for the “mummery” of Romanism “is to give up the Church mania altogether, to discard the whole idea of sacramental grace, to fall back on the Bible and private judgment as the true and only safe rule of Protestantism, and to make Christianity thus a matter of reason and common sense.”

Such a judgment would be a mirror image of

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20 Ibid., 361. Nevin’s specific concern, at least here, had to do with the sacramental meaning of baptism and not the (Ana)baptist rejection of the practice of paedobaptism. “It was all a pernicious mistake, we are told, that the old church made so much of the supposed mystical force of the institution; there is no particular mystery in it, baptism is simply a sign of spiritual benefits to be received in truth in quite another way; and to attach to it any higher significance, to make it in any view a vehicle of grace, is to endanger seriously the interests of evangelical religion. It is to fall into the vortex of the sacramental system, against which the entire evangelical host of God’s elect—whether known otherwise as Congregationalist, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Quaker, or what not besides—is bound to exercise watch and wage war forever, as part and parcel of the policy of Antichrist, to deceive the nations and destroy the church” (ibid., 372).
Nevin’s claim in “Catholic Unity” that the Reformation had yet to reach its *telos*, only in this instance Protestantism would be fulfilled by finally becoming not more catholic, but less.

As Nevin saw it, to take this route, one must deal with two sets of facts. Repeating a now-familiar claim, he argued that the greatest challenge for triumphalistic, low-church Protestants was to give an account for what he saw as their clear break with a great cloud of witnesses gathered from all epochs of the church’s past. The second set of facts, with which Nevin believed anti-sacramental Protestants had to come to terms, was the “historical” character of the recent groundswell of support for high-church notions. Just as Nevin had earlier scolded Brownson for cavalierly dismissing the great “fact” of the Reformation (and all its consequences for modern civilization) as theologically insignificant, so, here, he insisted that the Oxford movement and the “catholic and sacramental tendency in religion” more generally “is something too great, to be set aside lawfully by a flippant dash of the tongue or pen, or by a mere magisterial wave of the hand.”

Rather,

it is the part of true wisdom . . . to pause before such an imposing fact with a certain measure of reverence, whether our sympathies fall in with it or not . . . . It is not enough to say that the sacramental system is very childish and contrary to the Bible, and at war with evangelical religion, but that we may easily see still how it can have charms for persons of a sentimental and poetical turn of mind . . . while we pity and deplore their blindness as contrasted with our own light.

Low-church polemicists were simply not able to give an adequate response to “Puseyism and Popery,” because they failed to perceive the “vast body of awfully [*sic*] solemn and

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21 To this end Nevin provided a short summary of classic (i.e., magisterial) Protestant and ancient Christian views on baptism, in a manner similar to the historical section of Mystical Presence. Once again, he challenged all those who claimed to be restoring the primitive faith by rejecting convictions and practices held by the majority of historic Christendom to make an honest assessment of the theological implications of their assertions.

22 Ibid., 365.

23 Ibid., 365-366.
most deeply interesting and vital truth, which enters into these systems, and clothes them with their strange and mysterious authority for so many earnest minds.”

Skeptical readers might dismiss such language as an attempt to mask a lack of substantive argument by piling up overly precious phrases. For Nevin, perhaps the greatest demonstration of his claim that there was something “historical” (or, perhaps better, “providential”) about the “catholic and sacramental tendency in religion” was the powerful witness of the Anglican converts Newman and Manning, whose defections to Rome required such great personal sacrifice that they could, in his view, justly be described as martyrdoms. If one response to the Anglican Crisis was to celebrate the demise of all forms of “Romanizing” Protestantism, Nevin believed that these conversions of learned and sincerely pious Protestants made clear that the path leading the opposite direction remained open as well.

Option Two (Going over to Rome)

Nevin had to this point given no reason for attentive readers to think that he would himself endorse this second option. Since his debate with Brownson the previous year, he had given no indication that he found his arguments against rationalistic, unhistorical Romanism no longer persuasive. “The Anglican Crisis” offered no specific, positive arguments in support of Roman Catholicism. However, to Nevin’s mind one could not help but acknowledge that the Roman church had become startlingly attractive,

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24 Ibid., 368.
25 In “Modern Civilization” (MR III [1851]: 165-208), Nevin gave a mostly positive review of Spanish priest Jaime Balmès’s Protestantism and Catholicity Compared in their Effects on the Civilization of Europe [English trans., 1851]. Balmès’s primary goal was to rebut widespread myths about the backwardness and ignorance of the “Catholic” Middle Ages. Nevin argued that all self-satisfied Protestants needed to read the work and be led to repent of their ignorant prejudices. At the same time, he found himself unpersuaded by Balmès’s attempt to explain away what Nevin believed were the clear contributions of Protestantism to some of the best aspects of “modern civilization.”
even if only by standing in relief against the backdrop of Protestant compromise and confusion.

There was much about the present position of the English Catholic Church to earn the respect of all—including, especially, American Protestants zealous for the cause of religious liberty. “Who can doubt,” he asked, “but that the ground here taken by . . . the Romanists in general is of a higher character than that occupied by . . . the English establishment?” In addition, he continued, the excessive alarm of non-Catholics in response to the return of Roman Catholic bishops to England betrayed a fundamental insecurity.

All this did not amount to a positive argument. Yet the fact that Roman Catholicism should show signs of resurgence while trans-Atlantic Protestantism was plagued by such existential anxiety confirmed for Nevin that the tectonic plates of the post-Reformation ecclesial settlement were shifting. If events continued in their present course, even more conversions would surely follow, he predicted, in what would amount to a giant “church-slide.”

26 “On one side, the civil power is made to be the fountain of ecclesiastical authority; on the other, this authority is taken to be of an order wholly distinct from that of the state, independent of it, and for its own ends above it—derived originally from Christ . . . Can there be any question which of these two is most honorable to religion, most congenial to faith, most in harmony with the New Testament, most true to the authority of past history?” . . . . Let popery be never so foul and false, in itself considered, it is still something great, in this age of mechanism and sham, to find a large body of men thus solemnly committing themselves on its behalf to the old Catholic principle . . . that powers and rights ecclesiastical, are not from kings or civil parliaments, but from the divine constitution of the church” (“The Anglican Crisis,” 385).

27 “What a Circe after all this Popery must be, if the full grown Protestantism of England, in the middle of the 19th century, with all sorts of patronage and prejudice to back it, may not be allowed to meet the hag or look her fairly in the face, even on its own soil, for fear of being bewitched by her sorceries . . . . Seriously, we say, the cause of Protestantism is wronged, the cause of Romanism powerfully complimented, by every concession which implies in this way that there is any danger of an enlightened people, at this time of day, with its eyes open and its hand unbound, being led deliberately to exchange the boasted beauty and perfection of the first for the supposed ugliness of the second . . . . Such extreme sensitiveness to danger, such spasms of morbid jealousy and fear where the foe at the same time is represented as so poor and silly, so loathsome and vile, so miserably decrepit and weak, is to our mind we confess one of the most uncomfortable symptoms in the cause of Protestantism at the present time” (Ibid., 388).
It was clear that Nevin found it easiest to reject these first two responses to the Anglican crisis, despite the fact that these were the clearest and most straightforward positions—in that both involved committing oneself to clearly identifiable communities. With apologies to W.B. Yates, if it was indeed the case that the “best” seemed to lack all conviction when it came to the church question, while the “worst” (which also included the swelling numbers of outright unbelievers) were full of passionate intensity, in what could one hope?28

Option Three (Waiting in Exile)

The third potential response to the present state of the church question was to conclude that Romanism and Protestantism alike “have become historically powerless and dead” and to rest one’s belief and hope in a new divine dispensation that would provide “some special agency armed . . . with fresh apostolical [sic] commission and corresponding powers.”29 This was essentially the position of Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg and his followers, and of the English “Irvingites.” In the United States, Mormonism represented a “wretched caricature” of this general tendency with which Nevin could not help but feel some heartfelt sympathy.30

The most salient material to include under this heading are Nevin’s reasons for having little confidence that he could place his aspirations for “a truly Catholic Protestantism” in any existing denomination. It should be clear, he contended, that “the

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29 Ibid., 395.
30 Indeed, as I noted in Chapter One, Nevin read Emmanuel Swedenborg with a new appreciation in his final years and took a deep interest in mystical interpretations of scripture. Appel insisted that this final, otherworldly turn should be interpreted in light of Nevin’s highly advanced age and his sorrow over the recent loss of one of his sons (Life, 740-741). DiPuccio, keen to emphasize the continuity in Nevin’s thought and piety both before and after Mercersburg, sees the late turn to Swedenborg as a slightly different expression of his lifelong interest in “spiritual exegesis” (William DiPuccio, The Interior Sense of Scripture: The Sacred Hermeneutics of John W. Nevin (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 86-88; 91-93.
idea of the Church must become practically far more than it has been for English Protestantism than it has been, or it will inevitably become far less.”

The third option gained its poignancy and plausibility for Nevin from the fact that the latter outcome seemed much more likely.

It is too easy to wade through seemingly at first, is fast getting too deep for the legs of this [Anglican] system to touch bottom, and it must either swim beyond itself or sink. . . . It affords us no satisfaction, to come to this melancholy conclusion. We would feel it a great relief, rather, to be able to find in Anglican Episcopacy a truly rational and solid answer to the problem of which we speak, an Ararat of rest for the Ark of Protestantism . . . . For most firmly are we convinced, that no other sect or fragment of the general movement carries in itself, as such, the power and pledge of any such rest . . . Or is ever likely to prove hereafter” (ibid., 391-392).

In an earlier article, Nevin distinguished between two kinds of high-church Anglicans: those who begin with fundamental theological concerns (viz., the Incarnation), which lead them to faith in the Church; and those who begin with a particular given structure and set out to defend it. Clearly, he could eagerly embrace the first version but not the second. Idem, “Wilberforce on the Incarnation” Mercersburg Review II (1850): 164-196.

ontological (i.e., supernatural) reality, which makes it an object of faith itself, must take priority over its legal aspect.\(^{36}\)

As we saw briefly in the previous chapter, these were precisely the kinds of assessments of Protestant alternatives Orestes Brownson made in the years preceding his entry into the Roman Catholic Church. Brownson presented himself as a John the Baptist, waiting in the wilderness while calling his fellow Americans to repent and seek the “Church of the New Advent.” It would appear that the only thing keeping Nevin from committing himself to a similar stance was his conviction that behind all authentic high-church convictions and sentiments lay a profound trust in the promise, “Lo, I am with you always to the end of the world.”\(^{37}\) Therefore, he remained unable to believe that the entire church could have fallen from grace to such a fatal extent.

*Option Four (Historical Development)*

In the end, Nevin was still content to join his colleague Schaff in considering Protestantism, “with all its painful miseries, the main though by no means exclusive stream by which the general tide of the original Christian life is rolling itself forward, not without fearful breaks and cataracts and many tortuous circuits, to the open sea at last of that grand and glorious ideal of true Catholic Unity.”\(^{38}\) Up to now, this theory had given him sufficient peace of mind and spirit. However, there remained, as always, the stubborn facts.

\(^{36}\) “What is a *jure divino* polity . . . for a Church that shirks from proclaiming itself divine, and that has no faith practically in the supernatural character of its own constitution, as anything more than that of the American Tract Society, or any other outward league of evangelical sects! In this view it is, that the question of sacramental grace is more profoundly interesting than the question of episcopacy” (ibid., 379).

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 377.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 398.
Although it granted the possibility of “painful miseries” and “tortuous circuits,” did a commitment to “historical development” smooth over or harmonize too much? If Brownson’s supremely self-confident Romanism arrogantly disregarded the imposing fact and discordant note of the Reformation, could a theory of historical development avoid the opposite problem? Could it sufficiently demonstrate a real continuity between contemporary Protestantism and “the original catholic doctrine concerning the church, as it stood in universal authority throughout all ages before the Reformation”? In the subsequent three issues of the Mercersburg Review, Nevin raised all these questions as he embarked on what he insisted was a strictly historical inquiry into the character of the Church of the first Christian centuries.

“Early Christianity” and the Rival Theories of Historical Development

Immediately following “The Anglican Crisis” Nevin began a lengthy inquiry into the identity of “Early Christianity,” which began with a summary of the travel report of a Congregationalist minister from New England. As the Rev. Dr. Bacon described the state of evangelical Protestant missions in Lyons, France, he contrasted the general decadence of the overwhelmingly, though nominally, Catholic population and lamented that this ancient center of Christianity, hallowed by the blood of martyrs and graced with such powerful early teachers, had fallen into such a state. Nevin followed this report with excerpts from a similar publication from Daniel Wilson, Anglican bishop of Islington, who provided his reflections on church history after visiting both Lyons and, on the other side of the Alps, Milan.

39 Many contemporary readers will no doubt be tempted to ask, “what, precisely, is the ‘Christianity’ being located here, and—more importantly—who gets to determine it?” Nevin could simply assume that he shared with his primary opponents a stable canon of Early Church fathers, dogmas, and corresponding heresies. He was well aware that questions of historical evidence do not determine, nor can they be completely separated from, philosophical and theological presuppositions.
Nevin used these reports as his point of departure for a lengthy, and frequently caustic, attempt to prove that both the “Puritan” and “Anglican” theories of church history—in which a generally sound early church fell precipitously into “Popery” sometime after the fifth Christian century at the latest, cannot be squared with the historical record. He faulted Wilson (who was the more charitable of the two in his attempt to do justice to these strange historical figures) for misrepresenting the nature of indulgences in his description of Catholic Milan, and for turning all the “fathers” into pious Protestants (e.g., by explaining away certain decidedly un-Protestant statements of fifth-century bishop Ambrose with the excuse that he lived too near the onset of the “great apostasy” to be free from at least some of its taint). According to Nevin, since Wilson vastly underestimates the extent of genuine Christian piety in Roman Catholicism, he simply assumes that what sanctity did exist, as in the perplexing reports of the beloved sixteenth-century Saint Carlo Borromeo, “could not have been the product of the religion as such,” despite the fact that the piety of Borromeo and others was “constitutionally Catholic,” with a complexion “materially different from any that we meet with in the modern Protestant world.”

These essays bear striking similarities to Newman’s Essay on the Development of Doctrine. Nevin insisted to his readers that, “we owe it to ourselves here to see and own the full truth.”

The fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries were not Protestants of either the Anglican or the Puritan School. They would have felt themselves lost, and away

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41 Nevin lists, inter alia, Anselm, Augustine, Chrysostom, and the Cappadocians (i.e., “Basil and the Gregories”).
from home altogether, in the arms of English Episcopalianism, as well as in the more bony and stern embrace of Scotch Presbyterianism.\textsuperscript{42}

Later in the series, Nevin claimed that similar conclusions could be drawn about the church as far back as the third and even second century. He developed this case further in a four-part portrait of Cyprian of Carthage, his final major contribution to the \textit{Mercersburg Review} before resigning his editorship.\textsuperscript{43}

According to Nevin, these were essential facts to which Protestants must be reconciled.\textsuperscript{44} He insisted on the general conclusion that the difference between “Early Christianity” and various forms of modern Protestantism had to do with the system as a whole, which was characterized by “the conception of a truly Divine character belonging to the Church as a whole, and not to be separated from the attributes of unity and universality . . . the idea of an actual continuation of Christ’s presence and power in the church . . . the idea of sacramental grace, the power of absolution, the working of miracles to the end of time, and a real communion of saints extending to the departed as well as to those living on the earth.”\textsuperscript{45} The theological emphases of this patristic

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 489.
\textsuperscript{43} Nevin, “Cyprian” \textit{Mercersburg Review} IV (1852): 259-77; 335-87; 417-52; 513-63.
\textsuperscript{44} Many contemporary readers may be troubled by Nevin’s “Romantic” preference for sweeping historical categories, and to classify these as examples of the overconfidence that characterized nineteenth-century historicism more generally. Yet such condescending verdicts tend to ignore the very real problems that such thinkers were trying to address, or at least to assume that they have simple resolutions. There is no doubt that Nevin overstates his case at points. Moreover, he was aware that the sword of critical history cuts in more than one direction. He noted with fear and trembling that close relations and friends of several of the Tractarians had lost their Christian faith altogether.
\textsuperscript{45} “Early Christianity [I],” 486. Nevin added “miracles” to his description of classic, churchly Christianity here, which otherwise resembled his three-part article on “The Apostle’s Creed” during the first year of the Mercersburg Review. Nevin bracketed the question of the veridical status of actual miracle reports, but he emphasized the pervasive presence of an expectation of continual miracles in the church, noting especially that the veneration of relics reached back very far into the historical record. This fact reflected particularly poorly on strident Puritan claims to be preserving the faith “once for all handed to the saints.” According to Nevin, the difference between the ancient church and modern Puritanism was “not in the judgment exercised in regard to this particular miracle or that, but in the total frame of mind with regard to the universal subject: this is not faith, but absolute skepticism, just as complete as anything we meet with in Gibbon, Voltaire, or Hume” (idem, “Early Christianity [II]” \textit{Mercersburg Review} II (1851): 557.)
Christianity followed the Christological pattern of the Apostle’s creed, rather than a classic Protestant *ordo salutis* or standard revival sermon.\(^{46}\)

Nevin concluded his investigation by offering three basic theses.\(^ {47}\) First, he contended, to equate church history with a fall from grace is to succumb to Gnostic spiritualism and to become an ally of the destructive historical agendas of anti-Christian rationalists. Second, it follows from this that to remain orthodox, Protestantism must acknowledge historical Christianity (including “Romanism”) as its medium to the apostolic church and, ultimately, Christ himself. Finally, Protestants cannot escape the task of reconciling the radical discontinuities of their past with basic Christian convictions about the divine character of the Church.

The only escape then is in the formula of the same and yet not the same, legitimate growth, historical development. If this cannot stand, if it be found at war with the true idea of a Divine revelation, we for our part must give up all faith in Protestantism, and bow as best we can to the authority of the Roman Church.\(^ {48}\)

Nevin knew that “historical development” could mean many things. The critical question was: is there a theory both theologically satisfying and sufficiently subtle to account for all the facts? He began with John Henry Newman’s account before turning to various German theories ranging from “rationalistic” (Richard Rothe)\(^ {49}\) to “heterodox” (Heinrich Theirsch)\(^ {50}\) to pious (Philip Schaff).

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\(^{46}\) In addition, Nevin cited at length the historical conclusions of low-church Anglican Isaac Taylor, who sought to undercut the Oxford movement’s attempt to contaminate the Protestantism of the Church of England with post-biblical traditions. After a survey of the state of the Church during the fourth and fifth centuries, Taylor concluded that “Popery” actually served as a reforming influence, providing necessary restraint upon and giving structure to ritualistic and superstitious tendencies that threatened to spin out of control (Taylor, *Ancient Christianity and the Doctrines of the Oxford Tracts* [1840]).

\(^{47}\) These are actually the final three of seven summary points Nevin used near the conclusion of the series’ final article.

\(^{48}\) Nevin, “Early Christianity [I],” 482.

\(^{49}\) Nevin had recently read Rothe’s *Die Anfänge der Christlichen Kirche und ihrer Verfassung* (1837).

\(^{50}\) Heinrich W. J. Thiersch, *Vorlesungen über Katholicismus und Protestantismus* (1848).
Historical Development

Nevin judged Newman’s *Essay on the Development of Doctrine* to be overly conservative, allowing for “no disorder or contradiction” in the church’s onward movement.\(^{51}\) He believed that the Catholic Newman was forced to indulge in exaggeration and mistakes, since he must in the nature of the case rule out Protestantism as a legitimate historical development from the outset.\(^{52}\) Nevertheless, he insisted, Newman powerfully demonstrated the necessity of “making out the life of a true historical succession in [Protestantism’s] favor, by a deeper and better apprehension if possible of this idea of development.”\(^{53}\) Therefore, “few theological tracts, in the English language, are more worthy of being read, or more likely to reward a diligent perusal with lasting benefit and fruit.”\(^{54}\)

In general, Nevin continued, unlike Newman’s unacceptable cautiousness, the various German theories of development in church history allow for radical ruptures in the past. They generally do so by making each era of the Church only relatively right, while assuming that a later (imminent?) epoch will resolve the continually-heightening tension and bring the full sense of Christianity to completion. Richard Rothe concluded that the inexorable *telos* of the church is to fulfill its mission of redeeming all humanity by kenotically infusing its life into the state.\(^{55}\) Marburg professor Heinrich Theirsch

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\(^{52}\) He seems not to have taken seriously the fact that Nevin began the Essay while still an Anglican, perhaps concluding that it was written to justify a *fait accompli*.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., footnote, p. 35.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 33.

\(^{55}\) While praising his earnestness and learning, Nevin categorically rejected Rothe’s schema because of its denial of a genuinely supernatural end for humanity. (In addition, recall Nevin’s insistence, in *Anti-Christ*, that since the Incarnation was a catholic or “world-fact,” there could be many nations but, ultimately, only one church.) In the end, Nevin averred, “the church will not lose itself in the state; but it will be the state rather that shall be found then to have vanished away in the church” (ibid., 43). Jonathan Bonomo makes much of this last quotation in his recent *Church, Sacrament, and American Democracy*:
divided church history into four distinct eras—the “Old Catholic”; “Imperial Christianity”; “Roman Catholic”; and “Protestant”—and determined that the reconciliation of all of them would require a new divine dispensation along the lines of a new Pentecost.56

Instead of the four options set forth in “The Anglican Crisis,” Nevin now concluded with a description of three plausible forms of the Church’s subsequent development. First, Protestantism would eventually be absorbed back into Roman Catholicism, bringing with it a healthy evangelical leaven. Second, the reverse process would occur, and what remained of Catholicism would pass over into Protestantism, though not without bringing gifts of its own (in light of “The Anglican Crisis,” he surely believed this to be the least likely possibility). Finally, as in Schaff’s original proposal, both will lose themselves in a higher synthesis—“the type not of St. Peter nor of St. Paul, but of both rather as brought together by St. John.”57 Again, the first two possibilities had in their favor the fact that they maintained a real, essential continuity with actually existing churches.

To describe Nevin’s state of his mind at the end of “Early Christianity” we need to return to the rest of the letter he wrote to Brownson a few months later. In response to Brownson’s query about how the “Catholicism” of the early centuries can be placed “in any rational harmony with the cause of the Reformation,” Nevin made a frank admission:

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56 Thiersch had taken the third option described above. In 1850, he resigned his position at the University of Marburg after joining the Irvingites. Nevin had a copy of Thiersch’s writings on the church question near at hand while writing “The Anglican Crisis.”

57 This is actually from the conclusion to “The Anglican Crisis” (396).
I see not how it can be done in a fully satisfactory way; and it is no part of my plan or purpose to attempt anything of the sort. My object is merely to hold up facts, to bring home if possible to others the actual difficulty of the case, to challenge as it were our explanation, from whatever quarter it may come. . . . If Protestantism is to be upheld, it can be only in the view of it being the historical succession of what Christianity was in ancient times—a Providential development, not without necessary violence, which is to be regarded as itself a process only still, (not by any means pleasant) towards a better state of things to come. It would be much, if our American thinking could be forced to see and feel this alternative. You will observe, that I do not venture of late to commit my own mind to it with any absolute assertion. It is presented only hypothetically. If our cause may stand, then must it be in this general way and no other.58

A plain-sense reading of these statements cannot determine if they are best characterized as the reflections of a serious thinker and Christian believer wrestling with difficult questions, or as the confession of a tired but nonetheless committed Protestant with melancholic tendencies.

At this point, however, we turn to a summary of Nevin’s resolution of the most paralyzing and debilitating aspects of his dizziness. That is, how do we explain his decision to remain an active member of the German Reformed Church after making statements like these? Did the Mercersburg Theology’s attempt to settle the church question overcome Nevin’s inertia and, if so, how?

Restoration without Resolution59

In this section, I will not offer a comprehensive survey of the state of Nevin’s later (i.e., post-Mercersburg) mind vis-à-vis the church question. My more modest goal is to emphasize the importance of the fact that, following his dizziness, Nevin never resolved the particular dilemma identified in his letter to Brownson. He found sufficient, though surely not total, personal peace with the notion that he did not have to become a

58 Nevin to Orestes A. Brownson, Aug. 18, 1852. Brownson Archives, University of Notre Dame.
59 The title of chapter 9 of Nichols’ Romanticism in American Theology, which follows “Nevin’s Dizziness,” is “Consolidation and Recovery.”
Roman Catholic to remain “in Christ” and part of the Church, while declining to advance a clear and distinct historical-theological argument for how this could be the case.

At first glance, this is not a particularly novel claim. A few illustrations show that Nevin did not abandon the central themes of his Mercersburg years, nor did he resolve the strictly conceptual aspect of his dizziness and become a contented Reformed Protestant. The first is an article published in the late 1850s, titled “Thoughts on the Church,” which lacked the urgency and concreteness of some of his earlier, more polemical tracts. As in “Catholic Unity,” it placed the bulk of its emphasis on correctly discerning the nature of the ideal church before turning to questions of its actual manifestation. It appears that the latter considerations remained too painful or at least too perplexing for him to address in a standard manner. Thus, as I have stressed from the outset, in his formal description of the Mercersburg Theology a few years later Nevin forthrightly acknowledged that it remained encumbered with “vast practical embarrassment” when it came to the church question.

A more complicated but highly interesting piece of evidence comes from an article Orestes Brownson wrote for the Catholic World in 1870. Here, Brownson respectfully commented upon a recent article in the Mercersburg Review, while urging the author (as he had done with Nevin two decades earlier) to recognize that churchly Protestantism simply could not be sustained. In support of this now-familiar contention,

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60 Nevin, “Thoughts on the Church” Mercersburg Review X (1858): 169-98; 399-426. The opening section of the article begins with an apologia for the title: “Thoughts; not formal argument or discussion. What the case requires is not immediately and first of all a full regular theory or doctrine of the Church; much less a directly plea for any existing Church organization.” And on the next page: “Thoughts, we say again. Not words merely for the indolent, nor dreams for the sentimental, nor empty speculation for the curious. Thoughts for the thoughtful . . . for such as have their mind set on real things in the world of religion, more than upon names simply and outward traditional forms. . . . We write for the religiously thoughtful; not as offering to take the work of thought out of their own hands; nor yet as pretending to set before them any particular church scheme . . . but only for the purpose of assisting and guiding their own thoughtfulness on that great subject under consideration” (169-171).
Brownson asserted that Nevin, in a personal conversation, had ridiculed Schaff’s theory of historical development.⁶¹ This is a very important fact if true, though it would be difficult to reconcile with many of Nevin’s other statements. It may well be that this was Brownson’s somewhat senile or self-serving memory of Nevin’s less conclusive statements in the letter quoted above.

A final piece of evidence comes from Nevin’s defense of the Mercersburg Theology (and its liturgical embodiment) against the criticisms of the German mediating theologian Isaac Dorner. In response to Dorner’s charge that Nevin’s Incarnational theology had led part of the German Reformed to abandon the core Protestant emphasis on the individual’s justification coram deo, Nevin concluded that “the Protestant principle of justification by faith . . . is valid only as it falls back on the general principle of Christianity, which is none other than Christ himself, and this in such a way that Christ is not brought in as the instrument simply of our justification, but is apprehended as being at once in himself the whole fullness of our salvation.”⁶² As he had earlier insisted, when it came to the church question, “our theology is more Anglican than German. We stand upon the old creeds. We believe in the Holy Catholic Church.”⁶³ None of this sounds like an ultimately convinced Protestant who had regained his bearings.

Most recently, D.G. Hart concedes that Nevin’s reasons for not converting remain something of a mystery. Yet he argues that there is sufficient material from Nevin’s final decades to paint a portrait of “a man still thinking like a Protestant and still hoping to

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recover early Protestantism’s churchly character.” To show this, he points to some of Nevin’s statements written in the midst of his dizziness. The first is Nevin’s 1854 review of “[Robert] Wilberforce on the Eucharist,” in which Nevin defended Calvin’s Eucharistic theory against Wilberforce’s now-Roman Catholic criticisms, by arguing that it should hardly be surprising that Calvin, as a Protestant, departed from the basic doctrine of the ancient Church. What Wilberforce had not demonstrated, he claimed, was that these changes represented a radical overturn of the basic tradition.

Hart’s second item of evidence is the 1855 sermon Nevin preached at the installation of Bernard Wolff, in which Nevin continued to insist, in the midst of this Protestant communion, upon the “supernatural constitution” of the church and of a high, even sacramental, understanding of its ordained ministry. Hart concludes from this that Nevin was content to remain German Reformed, so long as it remained a community that took such claims seriously or, at least, allowed him—as an influential voice—to do so. However, as I noted at the beginning of this chapter, while the record is far from clear, such a reading tends to minimize just how ultimately destabilizing to Protestant identity the “Mercersburg Theology” was—and is. This is especially the case if one takes Nevin’s own description of it—with its stress on his embarrassingly unresolved questions about the Church—as a primary interpretive guide.

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64 Hart, *High-Church Calvinist*, 164.
66 Nichols makes the intriguing suggestion that had the leadership of the German Reformed Church responded to the publication of “The Anglican Crisis” and “Early Christianity” in the way that Newman’s Anglican superiors responded to his controversial “Tract 90,” Nevin may very well have gone to Rome. See Nichols, *Romanticism*, 208.
67 Because of his thickly contextual presentation of Nevin’s theological concerns, Hart largely does this. However, as Littlejohn rightly argues, Hart’s determination to portray Nevin as a “High-Church Calvinist” (and, thus, a worthy [and safe?] inspiration for catholic-minded, doctrinally traditionalist
During a trip back to Germany in 1854, Schaff described Nevin, and his struggles with the church question, for his audience. According to Schaff, Nevin “reproduced and lived over again the entire controversy between Romanism and Protestantism, and threw light upon it from new points of view.” Thus, Nevin was the “peculiar embodiment of the Church’s trouble (Kirchenschmerz), which has penetrated many of the most earnest spirits of the age. I do not believe that any theologian, either of the old or new world, feels it more keenly, or prays over it more zealously, than he.”

Schaff’s high praise was tempered by the gentle intimation that Nevin may simply have been too earnest for his own good. According to Schaff, Nevin may have drunk deeply from the well of German theory, but he remained at heart a practical-minded Anglo-Saxon unable to sustain for long the tensions between ideal and reality. In other words, for Schaff, only an American like Nevin would be so deeply shaken by the “vast practical embarrassment” that appeared when one sets the Mercersburg Theology alongside standard American church life. This is a helpful insight into Nevin’s convictions, with implications for how we interpret the relationship between the “Mercersburg Theology” and the church question.

For Schaff, the church question had a theoretical answer: Protestantism can and should be understood as the furthest and highest development of historical Christianity, provided that one understands that Protestantism is itself subject to further development.

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69 Ibid., 415. This was also part of Good’s overall assessment: Nevin’s residual Scotch realism led him to misappropriate German idealism in a woodenly concrete way. See Good, History, 313.
70 Though vulnerable to challenges, I find this way of describing their differences preferable to the mere assertion that Schaff was simply constitutionally more “optimistic” than Nevin.
Since the fundamental principles of historical development are basically determined, the primary “live” questions, from this perspective, were: how soon, and in what numbers, will Protestants come to grips with the historical character of their movement, as directed to both the past and the future? By contrast, as I claimed in the initial chapter, Nevin seems to have always had a sense that a right comprehension of the church question may very well entail far-reaching and difficult consequences. In the end, the most interesting query is, since Nevin identified the matter of “historical development” as the crux of the entire church question, did he have substantive reasons for neglecting to endorse a particular theory of such development? If so, though his dizziness may have been a source of practical embarrassment, and accompanied by substantial emotional distress, it was also a consequence of theological conviction.

_The Incarnation and the Church Question_

Right before “The Anglican Crisis” and the onset of his ecclesiological crisis, Nevin reached another impasse. In this case, it had to do with a highly speculative Christological question. In January of 1851, and again in March of the same year, he provided a “free translation” of recent statements of German theologians who had taken opposing views on a classic question of scholastic, speculative Christology: what was the primary motive for the Incarnation? Did Christ come to become the means of humanity’s redemption, or was the Incarnation itself God’s supreme work such that it would have occurred regardless of sin?^{72}

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^{71} As we noted in chapter II, this is not entirely true, as there were always tensions between the “romantic-organicist” and “idealist-dialectical” elements in Schaff’s training and thought. Nevertheless, the point that Schaff had a deep trust in the providential character of historical development remains valid. Schaff provided a lengthy description of his position, which sought to avoid the problems of both traditional “orthodox” church historiography and the new “rationalistic” approaches (e.g., Baur, Strauss, et al.) in Schaff, _Church History._

Nevin first presented a summary of Karl Theodor Albert Liebner’s argument that, in order to meet the challenge of spiritualistic rationalism, modern theological science needed to demonstrate “that aside from sin even Christ is the all fulfilling principle of perfection for the race.” Though he had not explicitly declared himself on the matter, a natural assumption, based on his earlier writings, is that Nevin would give this view a wholehearted endorsement. After all, according to Nevin, “the incarnation is the key that unlocks the sense of all God’s revelations. It is the key that unlocks the sense of all God’s works, and brings to light the true meaning of the universe.” How could this central fact of the cosmos have been a contingent afterthought, a “plan B” set in motion after humanity fell into sin?

Nevin offered little personal commentary, alternating between paraphrase and extended quotations provided by his own translation, other than to remark that Liebner was addressing matters of grave significance that deserved serious consideration. In the next issue, he summarized two recent articles by Julius Müller. Here, the University of Halle theologian answered the question “Would the Incarnation have occurred without sin?” most decidedly in the negative. He framed his response as an evaluation of the merits of the “Idealistic” view as compared with the soteriological theories of the Incarnation, so fundamental to historic Protestantism, with their emphasis on the

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73 Nevin, “Liebner’s Christology,” 60. The work under consideration was Liebner’s *Christologie oder die Christologische des Dogmatischen Systems* (1849). According to Liebner (via Nevin’s “free translation”), “The later German philosophy has served to force attention and inquiry towards questions, which had not been rightly answered before, and to which a full and fair answer is now required as the last sense of Protestantism and the innermost want of the age. . . . The Christological ideas of [Hegel] are very significant and full of instruction.” However, “monstrous” in themselves, “they still bear striking testimony to the great central fact of the gospel, by seeking to solve in another way the problem with which it is concerned; whilst they make it necessary for Christian science to go more deeply into its own truth” (ibid., 58).


75 The articles were published in *Deutsche Zeitschrift* (Oct 1850).
redemptive accomplishment of the God-man on the cross. Thus, he re-presented, in very
different form, many of the theological objections Charles Hodge had earlier raised
against Nevin’s theses on the Incarnation and the mystical union.

According to Müller, advocates of the idealistic view face the difficulty of
explaining why the Incarnation did not occur at the very beginning of human history.
Moreover, they are wrong to claim that their theory is simply a needed supplement to the
traditional, soteriological approach, since the latter is quite capable of incorporating all
the scriptural data. One must choose one or the other. The idealistic view has to come out
and argue that it is the “only sufficient key for the explanation of the whole fact [i.e., of
the Incarnation].”76 Yet in doing so, he continued, advocates of this position must, to
remain orthodox, make an exception for the cross. Otherwise, venerable concepts at the
heart of scripture (e.g. substitution, propitiation, etc.) become meaningless. This, at least,
must have been made necessary by the sin of humanity. But it is very difficult to claim
necessity for the cross after establishing that the Incarnation is the heart of the gospel. In
the end, Müller concluded, “every such view tends to sink the central mystery of faith
into the form of a mere accommodation to human fancy and conceit, stripping it of all
objective necessity and so of all real inward power . . . .”77

Here again, Nevin commended Müller’s arguments to his readers, noting that
Müller had not attributed these dire consequences directly to Liebner et al., “regard[ing]
them rather as fellow laborers with himself on the same platform of evangelical
freedom.”78 His goal had been to prod the proponents of the idealistic view to a clearer
and more careful explication of their theory, “the special advantages of which for the

77 Ibid.
78 Ibid., 238.
scientific construction of Christian doctrine he can fully appreciate.”79 (It is highly likely that Nevin viewed this as a much better attempt at fraternal correction than he had earlier received from Hodge, and that this contributed to his serious consideration of Müller’s challenge).

In the end, however, Nevin did not venture to declare himself on the matter at the heart of the debate. On Nichols’s reading, Nevin’s whole doctrine of the Incarnation here “ran out into a question mark and remained unresolved.”80 To conclude this chapter, and this examination of the Mercersburg Theology as an attempt to wrestle with the church question, I want to show a way that Nevin could have refused to decide between Liebner and Müller, while retaining his faith in the Incarnation as the cardinal fact with which all conceptions of history must deal. Then, we can conclude by saying something about what all this means for the church question and the crucial issue of “historical development.”

*It Did Not Have to Be*

The goal of this final section is not to make an air-tight case about the “historical Nevin,” nor is it to propose a full-blown theology of history. Instead we can turn to the opening questions of the Third Part of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* for theological justification of a degree of equivocation on the question of the motive for the Incarnation. On such a basis, Nevin’s dizziness appears as an eminently defensible place to stand, even if—as the awkward metaphor suggests—an unresolved church question presents a number of profound and discomforting practical and theological problems.

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79 Ibid.
80 Nichols, *Romanticism*, 150.
German Catholic philosopher Alois Dempf voiced a common perception when he described Thomas Aquinas as “the simply timeless man who has no use for history.” Yet Aquinas’ answers to questions such as, “Was it fitting that God become incarnate?”, “Would Christ have come if humanity had never sinned?” and, “Would it have been more appropriate if the Incarnation had taken place at the beginning of human history or been delayed until its end?” are a fascinating treatment of the relationship between dogmatic theology and at least certain particular, unrepeatable events.

As we have seen, Julius Müller insisted that Christian theology must answer one way or the other: was the Incarnation part of God’s idea for creation from its beginning, or not? In a rare admission, Aquinas insisted that this is an unusually difficult question, and that good theologians are not of one mind on the matter. However, he concluded that, in keeping with the plain sense of scripture, it is “more conveniently” (or “fittingly”—conveniens) said that the Incarnation is a work ordained by God as a remedy for sin. He also endorsed the view, expressed in the litany of the Easter Vigil, that the sin of our first parents was a felix culpa, because the greatness of the redemption it occasioned exceeded the extent of our plight. It was not strictly good that humanity fell into sin (Adam deserves no credit for humanity’s redemption), but it was good that God

82 For an excellent survey of the history of this question within the Christian theological tradition, up to the mid-twentieth century, see Jeremy Moiser, “Why Did the Son of God Become Man?” The Thomist 37 (1973): 288-305.
83 Summa Theologiae III q. 1 a. 3. Earlier, when considering the same question in his commentary on Peter Lombard’s Sentences, he wrote that, “the truth of the question is known only to God. We can know what depends solely on the divine will only insofar as we can glean some knowledge from the writings of the saints to whom God has revealed his purpose.” In III Sent. d. 1, q. 1, a. 3 (I owe this reference to Moiser).
was able to respond to this eventuality in a way befitting God’s perfect wisdom and goodness.\textsuperscript{84}

At the same time, though he denied that the Incarnation was an inevitable unfolding of the divine purpose, Aquinas left open the possibility that it could have occurred, even if the human race had not sinned. He had just before argued that the Incarnation could only be considered necessary in a qualified sense.\textsuperscript{85} Why these qualifications?

To say that the Incarnation was necessary (at least, as he argued, in the logical sense that a whole is necessarily more than its parts) would be to call into question its status as one of the first principles from which the scientia of theology proceeds.\textsuperscript{86} That is, if it was necessary in the sense that extrinsic considerations actually required it, the Incarnation would no longer be a given that is intrinsically related to who God is for us—
a divine fact in the sense of “something done”—but merely a conclusion drawn from those other considerations. For a similar reason, Aquinas granted that the “Idealist” answer to the question of the motive for the Incarnation might be right, but theology has no way of knowing this. The path of wisdom is therefore to keep speculation on these matters within what can be said with confidence.

Contrary to the stereotype of the ahistorical scholastic, Aquinas granted that history must be attended to, but through the lens of divinely revealed wisdom. Any historical details worth dogmatic attention exist in harmonious interrelation with all else we can know and say about the world in the light of what we know about God (i.e., sacra

\textsuperscript{84}For his explanation of what it might mean to say that a good and powerful God “permits” evil so that even greater good might be achieved, see ST Ia 2.3 ad 1; 19.6; 19.9; 48.2; 49.2.

\textsuperscript{85}ST III q. 1 a. 2.

\textsuperscript{86}As described in the opening discussion of sacra doctrina in ST I a.1. 2.
doctrina). Since the Incarnation is itself God’s self-communication, theology must be primarily concerned with certain concrete events that took place in what we now refer to as the first-century—a chronological convention that reflects his (and Nevin’s) own view that history is Christ-centered.

What does all this mean for the church question? Aquinas’ claim that God permits such things as Adam’s sin “that he might draw forth some greater good” affirms something like the fittingness of created, contingent history. Put simply, in light of the Incarnation, no other historical events can ever be strictly necessary. Likewise, because of Christ, all historical events can be faced because they find their ultimate meaning and redemption in this one life. This entails that an event like the Reformation remains an open possibility for the Church in principle, though certainly not a necessary. Its violence did not have to be. It was contingent, and thus redeemable—but certainly not God’s direct (i.e., “free”) action in the same way as the Incarnation. The claim here is that Aquinas’ apophatic qualification of his answers to these speculative questions about the Incarnation correlates to Nevin’s inability or unwillingness to answer the church question in the terms it was posed (i.e., either the Reformation was a giant mistake or that it was part of the unfolding of God’s purposes in history).

Conclusion

As we saw in the last chapter, a basic problem within the Mercersburg Theology was the unresolved dissonance between Nevin’s equivocal references to “history” as the

87 What Müller’s position seems to have ruled out is what Henri de Lubac attempted to recover from the church fathers and from his reading of Aquinas—i.e., the “natural” desire for a supernatural destiny (de Lubac, The Mystery of the Supernatural, trans. Rosemary Sheed [New York: Crossroad, 1998 (1967)]. Similarly, the thrust of Nevin’s work was to ensure that the incarnate Jesus Christ really saves embodied, historical human beings. This is hard to explain without encountering a paradox. In the light of the Incarnation, Christians cannot help but retrospectively see in Christ the fulfillment of all human longings, and not simply a contingent remedy for sin. But the Christian also has no way of understanding what “Christ” might mean apart from his salvific mission.
concrete past and “history” as a theologically freighted conception of the general
direction and contemporary significance of the past. As regards the first sense, Nevin’s
criticisms of Brownson’s “Romanism” are basically unassailable. It is hard to see how
Brownson’s claim that the Church is impervious to historical change was not an attempt
to avoid the scandal of the Incarnation, and its blurring of the lines between eternal truths
of reason and accidental facts of history.

As regards the second, normative sense of “history,” however, Nevin’s
imprecision about the relationship between not simply “incarnation” but the Incarnation
(i.e., Christ) and “historical development” left him open to the kind of attacks he received
from Hodge and Brownson. Brownson essentially responded to Nevin’s claim that he
was “too violent” toward the facts of history by asking in return: What if the facts of
“history”—i.e., particular accounts of previous human actions (as best as we can re-
present them)—are frequently violent toward God, in the sense that certain events can in
no sense be attributed to God’s will? 88

Nevin did not respond precisely to this last set of criticisms, apart from his plea
that all his claims about the divine presence in “history” amounted to nothing more than
an attempt to distinguish “biblical theism” from Deism. “By being free,” he insisted,
“[history] does not cease still to be God’s act, and in this view a process of self-
explication, by which [God] comes forth from the depths of eternity into the syllabled
speech of time . . . .” 89 Clearly, Nevin had no sympathy for Brownson’s persistent

88 Brownson did not make a direct reference to the Crucifixion as an essential hermeneutical
counterpoint for “incarnational” theology (that would have been out of keeping with his more philosophical
style: the result of his rejection of Protestantism in early adulthood). However, the point is congruent with
his warning about Nevin’s historical optimism.

dismissal of the Reformation and all that followed directly in its wake as a comedy of errors with no ultimate bearing on the Church.

Yet Brownson pressed the issue of how one is to discern God’s “self-explication” through time in a way that should have given Nevin pause, as it implicated the cardinal principle of the Mercersburg Theology. See, for example, a passage in the same vein from Nevin’s original assessment of “Brownson’s Quarterly Review”:

The Protestant movement may prove morally unequal to its own problem. Still this cannot change the significance of the fact as now stated. It belongs to the reigning power of the world's civilization. It has its seat in the spirit of the nations that go with it, and their spirit now rules the course of humanity, as something plainly in advance of the spirit that meets us in nations still bound to the authority of Rome. In this view, if we believe in Christ, we are bound to acknowledge in it, if nothing more, yet surely the necessary medium of transition at least for the Church of God into a higher and better state. Not to do so, turns the past into a riddle and shrouds the future in despair. Protestantism, as the world now stands at all events, has the floor of history, carries the word of the age; and the last sense of Christianity, the grand scope of Christ's Mediatorial reign, is to be reached through it, by its help and intervention in some way, and not by its being hurled aside as an impertinent accident, or mere nullity, in the course of this all conquering dispensation.90

In other words, we might ask, was it “the Incarnation” (as an idea affirming the divine presence in “history,” defined essentially by what seems to be its inexorable direction), or the incarnate, “theanthropic” person of Jesus Christ (the “Christian fact”) that guided Nevin’s claims about the “historical” character of Protestantism?

The point here is not to claim that Brownson was ultimately right about Nevin’s “pantheism.” Rather, it is to observe that if, as Nevin himself contended, the Incarnation is “the key that unlocks the sense of all God’s works,” his sweeping observations, like those just quoted above, about the course of human history and what history “plainly” reveals risked turning into self-congratulatory banalities (or worse) to the degree that he

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neglected to engage in more careful discernment of where and how Christ was present in the Church’s past (including, most notably, the Reformation) and how the “spirit that now rules the course of humanity” might be related to the Holy Spirit. He provided nothing like John Henry Newman’s “notes” for discerning true from false developments of doctrine.

In his Essay, Newman famously claimed that, “to be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant.” Nevin would have agreed wholeheartedly, if he could simply substitute “pseudo-Protestant” or “modern Puritan” for “Protestant.” It is highly ironic, then, that one of Brownson’s criticisms amounted to a charge that Nevin had failed to be “deep” in American history, by failing to locate the church and its authority in any particular place at the present time.

Nevin’s predicament was reminiscent of the Southern intellectuals who—as described by political theorist Louis Hartz—rooted their at-times probing and insightful opposition to Yankee modernism on the fantasy that their American-style “slavocracy” was organically linked to the chivalric feudalism romanticized in the novels of Sir Walter Scott. Similarly, Nevin was not deep in his own history, but in another way. Though he claimed to be vindicating true Protestantism against its deformed American version, he did not provide evidence (along the lines of his detailed historical research in Mystical Presence) for an earlier or classic form of Protestantism for which “historical development” was a fundamental axiom.

To a certain degree, as we have seen, Nevin did engage in just this kind of concrete, historical-theological discernment in tracts like Anxious Bench and Anti-Christ,

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91 Newman, Essay, 8.
92 Hartz, The Liberal Tradition in America, 158-167.
as well as articles like “True and False Protestantism,” “Kirwan’s Letters” and “Brownson’s Quarterly Review.” However—as he repeatedly acknowledged—he was primarily engaged in what could be called “apophatic ecclesiology,” as his clearest statements always had to do with where one could not locate either the Church of history or the Church of the future (e.g., the pseudo-Protestantism of the sect system, and “Romanism”). In the later articles, it became clear that the basic fault of each of these unacceptable alternatives was its categorical refusal to acknowledge the other party as part of the Church’s past, present, or future.

As D.G. Hart noted in a paper given at the opening of a Center for the Study of the Early Church at evangelical Wheaton University, Nevin's dizziness certainly serves as a warning to evangelical Protestants tempted to spend time with the pre-Reformation past (i.e., “here be dragons”). But is it not, after all, a dangerous thing to fall into the hands of the living God? By refraining from offering a decisive vindication of Protestantism, Nevin incorporated a kind of vertigo into the heart of the Mercersburg Theology. Most importantly, he did so on the basis of positive convictions about the Incarnation, rather than for the sake of (false) humility. He thus serves as a poignant reminder of both the fundamentally theological passion that fueled much of the classic ecumenical movement the Mercersburg Theology anticipated and the painful, awkward fact of its present stasis.

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EPILOGUE
THE CHURCH QUESTION THEN AND NOW

To argue in the early twenty-first century that John W. Nevin should be commended for having refused the ecclesiological options mandated by post-Reformation polemics is to risk appearing rather banal. After the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, it is only the most dogged traditionalists (and, in some cases, schismatics) who continue to insist on the terms set by the age of mutually antagonistic “confessionalization.” Yet—as evidenced by the host of contemporary “Catholic tendencies” with American Protestantism—the church question remains unanswered. Moreover, it shows no signs of resolution.

It need not be reductionistic to note that the church question has seemed to press itself upon a critical mass of American Protestant consciences in times of particularly intense social (economic, cultural) instability. Bratt argues that at least some forms of neo-orthodoxy” (in particular, the early writings of H. Richard Niebuhr from the 1930s) carried many of Nevin’s concerns forward in that era.\(^1\) More recent examples of a Catholic tendency in late 20\(^{th}\) century American Protestantism surely have something to do with exhaustion from the post-1960s “culture wars” as well as the transition to a post-industrial, globalized economy—much as the trans-Atlantic churchly revival of the nineteenth-century occurred amidst the travails of early industrialization. It stands to

\(^1\) Bratt, “Reorientation,” 82.
reason that such times give rise to a renewed appreciation of Christ as the “bond of a universal life,” made present in and through the visible Church and its sacraments.

Today, a Catholic like Orestes Brownson could willingly grant that Nevin (and countless other separated siblings) was truly “in Christ,” despite the fact that he lacked full communion with the body in which the Church of Christ “uniquely subsists.” However, this epochal event has become in certain respects a pyrrhic victory. To no small extent, at least in the United States, “Protestants” and Catholics have largely become like the denominations Nevin described in Anti-Christ: once-bitter rivals whose relationship is now characterized by a polite friendliness which simply affirms that they “have entered into different theological and ecclesiastical worlds, in which each has lost the power, to a great extent, of understanding the [other], or taking any interest in their affairs.”

There are many reasons for this, of course. The shape of the church question is different than it was in antebellum America, and it would take far too long to give an adequate account of it. Though there may be a number of Catholic tendencies at present within various strands of American “Protestantism,” their advocates are often as incomprehensible to their co-religionists as Nevin was to most of his. To his credit, Nevin foresaw at least some of these difficulties. It seems appropriate to end with a final exposition of yet another of his attempts to read the signs of the times and assess the state of the church question.

In the inaugural article of the Mercersburg Review (January 1849), Nevin offered a meditation on the significance of the year just past, contending that the confluence of several antecedent tendencies gave the powerful impression that the world’s history had

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2 Lumen Gentium (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) 8.
flowed into a new channel. The three factors he identified were: the spirit of revolutionary democracy sweeping Europe; the addition of yet more massive territory to the United States in the wake of the Mexican War; and, finally, new developments in transportation and communication that represented a substantial advance in the conquest of time and space. Despite the fact that “it is not for any age or period, fully to understand itself,” it seemed undeniable to Nevin in January 1849 that the previous year had ushered in a new epoch for the world. ⁴

Whatever else the future would hold, he concluded, the world was now a place in which America would play a leading role, for good or ill. All this could be illustrated by contrasting the violent conflicts in Germany, France, and Italy with yet another peaceful exchange of power in the recent U.S. presidential election. For half a century now, while the “old world” was breaking up, the United States was quietly serving as a kind of incubator of the future. The European revolutions were, at bottom, fueled by the “spirit of America, or if we choose to call it, the genius of Protestantism itself, as it has come to identify itself with our American institutions.” ⁵

From a superficial standpoint, he conceded, recent events might seem to demonstrate that the future belongs to the political forces of radical revolution in Europe and elsewhere. They might seem to validate the supporters of the Mexican War and inflate parochial American self-righteousness, and they might tempt humanity to conclude that a turning point in its struggle against the forces of nature has been reached. However, he insisted, one can reject the particular human motives behind the Mexican War and abhor the bloodshed it occasioned, while still standing in reverent wonder at the

⁵ Ibid., 26.
mysterious purposes such events advance on the level of the “interior objective life of
history.”6 In other words, reverence for the God of history requires that we press forward,
humbly acknowledging a new age of the world, while refusing to celebrate it as a final
accomplishment. Nevin made clear that to recognize that the new era somehow belongs
to democracy, to “America,” and to Protestantism, is not the same as endorsing the
particular goals and tactics of the “antihistorical” revolutionaries of Europe; nor is it to
underwrite parochial American bigotries, whether political, ethnic, or denominational.

Echoing the conventional wisdom of his time and class, Nevin maintained that
human civilization seems to have developed progressively from East to West. This
longitudinal movement has surely come to an end, he declared. New technology (e.g., the
railroad and the telegraph) was transforming the shape of daily life on a scale not seen
since the eve of the Reformation nearly four centuries earlier. Soon, he predicted, Europe
and Asia would join hands across the American continent. Thus, for the United States to
fulfill its mission, it must make room in itself for the rest of the world. It could only be a
“universal” nation, not one based on race or tribe. “The day for ‘Nativism’ in all its
forms, is fast drawing to an end,” he insisted.7

Specifically—and this is the critical point for understanding Nevin’s outlook in
January 1849—this meant that “America” and “the spirit of Protestantism” represented
something like the indispensable raw materials of the future, but they were not
themselves the future. The new epoch would not be characterized by the United States
subduing the rest of the world and reshaping it in its image. Rather, the new world epoch

6 Ibid., 23.
7 Ibid., 32.
would be a matter of “the world itself . . . wrestling in its own inmost constitution, through the medium of American influence, towards a general and common end.”

Contemporary readers will likely find Nevin’s sensitivity to major historical developments somewhat insightful (though, sadly, he did predict that the nascent nation of Liberia would soon serve as a beacon of hope and liberty on the African continent). “The Year 1848,” also shows Nevin at his most “Hegelian,” as he rose to new (i.e., “world-historical”) and, we could also say, supercessionist heights. To return to a theme from the introduction, sweeping assertions about “History” appear to turn semper reformanda into an abstract principle with no substantive norm. When a commitment to ongoing self-criticism becomes a prized part of one’s identity, it easily becomes an inoculation against real, external critique, foreclosing the possibility of what Brownson described as the freedom of God.

Toward the end of “The Year 1848,” Nevin finally brought the church question to the fore. He insisted that Christianity must respond to these momentous changes and refuse to remain in stasis. The Church must assess the challenges and opportunities of the new era and press forward to victory. Humanity’s moral and spiritual development must keep pace with its outward prowess, he warned, or “we will all perish.”

As he put it in a later article, the Church’s evangelical mission has both extensive and intensive dimensions. Therefore, in addition to taking the gospel to the furthest reaches of the globe (or the most remote sections of the American frontier), the Church has a responsibility to “take up into itself the whole life of the world on all its sides, art,

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8 Ibid., 30.
9 Nevin, “Catholicism” Mercersburg Review III (1851): 6, and passim.
science, government, etc. fulfilling thus the old dream of the Catholic Church.”

However, he added, if the Protestant era is to have any meaning in a providential view of history, all this must take place in a “free spiritual way.”

Nevin characteristically offered few details of what a new Christendom, established on “free” and “spiritual” terms, would look like. Since the world is rapidly becoming more interconnected, will the Church, too, become more united and “compact,” he inquired, “or will it be imagined that its unity is to resolve itself into a mere invisible sentiment?”

He acknowledged that the present climate seemed distinctly hostile to the idea of any “outward catholic organization.” However, as he had been arguing for the previous half-decade, “the idea of the Church seems to involve unity, catholicity and visibility as its necessary elements whenever it has come to be felt as an object of faith.” Therefore, he maintained, one can confidently declare that the presently existing American Protestant sect system is not the church of the future.

Once again, Nevin concluded by clarifying the nature of the Church’s present travails while trusting in the providential trajectory of history to resolve what seemed on its face to be an intractable dilemma. However difficult it may be to envision the path toward a reformed, visibly united, Catholic Church of the future, “To God we commit this mighty problem. May he resolve it soon in his own glorious way.”

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10 Nevin, “True and False Protestantism,” 100.
11 Ibid.
12 Nevin, “The Year 1848,” 44.
13 Nevin’s comments here call to mind George Lindbeck’s repeated acknowledgments that the dominant “psychosocial” pressures of the time (i.e., the late 20th century) were not exactly hospitable to postliberal Christianity, and its ecclesial turn in theological method. See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 21-22, 124.
14 Nevin, “The Year 1848,” 43-44.
Nevin was content to leave certain critical matters unresolved because he was sufficiently convinced that no alternative positions could do more historical and theological justice to the church question as it then stood. Though he remained a committed member of the German Reformed Church, his frank admission of his embarrassment at the unresolved church question gives us reason to think that he may ultimately have chosen what he described as the third possible option to take in response to the Anglican Crisis—i.e., waiting patiently in the ruins of a broken Church for a new dispensation. At the time, he rejected this as incompatible with faith in the Church’s natural-supernatural character, grounded in the Christological mystery.

However, one can argue that it is possible to be both “in Christ” and, at the same time, member of a truly broken church. If that is indeed the case, only a genuinely cruciform, penitential patience can keep the Catholic tendency in American Protestantism from being little more than a sentimental attachment to a cause long-since lost.

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