Introduction: The academic revolution and American religious thought

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The essays in this volume are drawn from a conference on religion and American intellectual life held in 1986 at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C. The purpose of the gathering was to explore the status of religious thought—and thought *about* religion—in the cultural history of the United States over the past century. Although most historians acknowledge the importance of certain religious ideas in the belief systems that dominated American culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the history of American religious thought since the nineteenth century's scientific and scholarly revolutions and the rise of the modern university reveals a more complicated and ambiguous role in American culture.

Major patterns of response

The revolutions begun in the nineteenth century have not ended, even as we near the twenty-first century mark. The new hermeneutics, the intricate methodologies of the "higher criticism," and continual refinements in knowledge of evolution agitate thought about the nature, grounds, and functions of belief.

Three broad patterns of response to these historical confrontations can be discerned: the fundamentalist response, which resisted the inroads of the new thinking and developed a new emphasis on literal understanding of the Bible; the modernist response, which embraced the spirit of critical inquiry without abandoning religious commitments and sought to construct its theological interpretations along evolutionary, developmental lines; and the naturalist response, which challenged both these conservative and liberal forms of theism at their very core. Each response

is part of a complex tradition of thought, internally varied and marked by the strains of ongoing disputation. The naturalist response was the important newcomer, historically speaking, within the culture of the best-educated American elites. The naturalists could, and on occasion did, appreciate the social and psychological functions of religious belief, but they did so on grounds not likely to ease the minds of their traditionalist or modernist contemporaries. As John Herman Randall, one of its ablest historians and expositors explained, naturalism is an epistemology, growing out of the premises and assumptions of scientific method, that "finds itself in thoroughgoing opposition to all forms of thought which assert the existence of a supernatural or transcendental realm of being and which make knowledge of that realm of fundamental importance to human living."[1] This position, of course, has important implications for the character and quality of theological inquiry in the academy.

Until the last third of the nineteenth century, the life of the mind in the United States was largely dominated by the concerns and controversies, innovations and accommodations, of the Protestant clergy. The academic revolution and the rise of the modern, research-oriented university, however, changed all that. With its secular and pluralistic conventions, its specialized hierarchies, and its precise and principled segregation of fields of learning, the emerging university system broke up this cultural situation and supplanted its style of leadership, gradually crowding its spokesmen toward the background and into the interstices of what was becoming the institutional powerhouse of modern thought in all its varieties, both pure and applied. The difficult question of what happened, in the course of these institutional developments, to traditions of theological reflection and their place within the general culture figures in a number of the papers in this volume.

Certainly the naturalists, given their philosophical family ties to the natural and social sciences, felt especially at home in the new university environment. Theological modernists of one sort or another seem always to have been present on campus, but most have not been especially visible or influential there. The seminaries and divinity schools at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Chicago, and Stanford, Union Theological Seminary in New York, and many other places have provided an institutional setting for religious and theological inquiry, but, as Van Harvey points out in his essay, their specialized and segregated place within the wider university

[1] John H. Randall, Jr., "The Nature of Naturalism," in *Naturalism and the Human Spirit*, ed. Yervant Krikorian (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), p. 358.

community has worked to render their undertakings marginal to the deeper currents of intellectual life in the United States.

The university proved to be an inhospitable environment for traditionalist evangelicals. Despite its high birth and Princeton lineage, conservative evangelical scholarship in the period between 1920 and 1950 entered a kind of dark ages. As George Marsden points out in his contribution, secularist and positivist assumptions were in the ascendant during this period: in addition, the new voices of Jewish scholars and scientists, with no interest, understandably enough, in reviving the vestiges of Christian civilization, began to be heard in the affairs of the academy and the burgeoning new learning. And so traditionalist energies turned elsewhere. One result was the Bible Institute movement, which spawned practical training centers focusing only on the scriptures.

The naturalist ethos and secularization

Thus a naturalist ethos became dominant in the nation's principal universities. By the 1930s, as Bruce Kuklick observes in his paper on John Dewey, the great seminal figure in the systematic elaboration of naturalism, high religious thought had gone out of fashion among the educated middle class, and politics became the field in which questions of ultimate commitment were to be confronted. A naturalist reading of the historical development of the American mind itself flourished in the new university environment. In that interpretation, the Puritans, with their complex, Calvinist theological inheritance, stood at the far end. At the near end—and, as they claimed, at the growing end—were the scientific and philosophical naturalists, with their lines of affiliation extending outward to colleagues in the university. In between were a series of liberation movements, given purchase by an ever firmer grasp of methods of analysis and an ever more precise rigor in their application. As Henry May reports on his encounter with the naturalist perspective in the 1930s, it was a progressive, democratic outlook on history, based in part on a set of assumptions of Enlightenment vintage, "lodged in the unconscious where assumptions are hardest to dislodge," that while reason and democracy were advancing, religion was necessarily in decline.

Many deduced from this view that although religious thought and sentiment may have been important elements in the experience of people in the past and might even continue to be so for those furthest removed by class, denomination, or education from any sustained experience with

the canons of the new inquiry, it was of no genuine importance for the elites most visibly engaged in building up contemporary cultures through their work in the arts, sciences, and humanities. As Henry May succinctly put it, this was so because religion was "known to be dependent on a series of dogmas and legends that no serious intellectual could entertain."

Although a naturalist outlook remains the predominant one in the nation's research universities, its application to American intellectual history over the past century is less satisfactory than it was once thought to be, and concern on that point prompted The Wilson Center's conference. For all its strengths, there were some obvious shortcomings in this particular naturalist perspective, rooted mainly in the premises regarding secularization on which it was based. First, there was the evident high quality of certain branches of contemporary thought on religion. Whereas the assumption of continuing secularization seemed to predict that these traditions of inquiry were destined for enfeeblement in the modern period, it is now apparent that the twentieth century is a great age of theological reflection, comparable in depth and scope to the nineteenth century. Some "serious intellectuals," in other words, have in fact entertained dogmas and legends to good effect, as is demonstrated in the careers of Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Rudolph Bultmann, Bernard Lonergan, Karl Rahner, Yves Congar, Martin Buber, Abraham Heschel, and others, not to mention Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr, who figure so frequently in the essays that follow.

It was becoming clear, also, that simply as an empirical matter we knew a good deal less than we ought to know about the religious ideas and beliefs of modern academic intellectuals, if the evidence for a naturalist reading of intellectual history were to be properly weighed. It is now evident that some among the founding fathers of the modern American academic ethos held more complicated views on religion than a naturalist account would allow. A great many who played important roles in working out the origins of the modern consciousness were in fact theists and "supernaturalists" of a sort, rather different from their successors, among them Charles S. Peirce, William James, Josiah Royce, Henry Carter Adams, Albion Small, Charles Horton Cooley, and other builders of modern traditions of research in philosophy and the social sciences. On the contemporary scene there are a number of influential scholars whose positions are difficult to classify in old-fashioned, naturalist terms, among them Robert Bellah, Peter Berger, and Henry May.

In addition to these considerations, there was the desire to supplement

and offset to some degree the concentration of the media and the attentive portions of the scholarly community on relations between religious belief and mass political behavior, the principal cases in recent years being the stirrings within Roman Catholicism in the United States and the new burst of activism shown by the conservative evangelical community. The widespread assumption that the main role played by religious belief in American culture has to do with its bearing on mass political behavior points to an important set of relationships and has a well-established framework of analysis behind it. But it calls attention away from the questions of modern religious thought and the problems of relating them to the experience of the country's cultural elites over the past century. Thus the focus of these papers.

Recognizing these flaws in a secularization view of the past century and yet being aware of the philosophical power of the naturalist outlook that encompassed and accompanied it, we suspected that some new ground might be opened up by questioning the sufficiency of categories themselves and concentrating not on secular thought alone, or on "religious" thought as an alternative to it, but rather on the incessant interactions between these two poles. The interplay itself has a history, and is deeply rooted in the dynamics of thought that arose during the American Enlightenment on the relations between science and religion. For reasons of space we have not been able to explore these early roots, but the continuing flow and interplay of reciprocal influence for the modern era figures in a number of the papers in this volume.

The conference participants were drawn primarily from two sectors of the academic community that have had relatively little to do with one another in the past. On the one hand were the cultural and intellectual historians in university departments of history and American studies, who are preoccupied with the problems of relating ideas and beliefs to the broader patterns of social change over time. On the other hand were the theologians, church historians, and philosophers of religion from the seminaries, divinity schools, and those curious academic hybrids, the departments of religious studies.

So far as denominational connections were evident, and by convention it is thought hardly pertinent to inquire into this aspect of biography when dealing with intellectual historians, the participants were drawn primarily from the principal Protestant churches. The situation of the Catholic and Jewish communities was not dealt with in the program, nor was there any attempt to consider the situation of religious thought in

the black churches or in the churches of other minorities. These are, of course, regrettable omissions, and in arranging the event we understood that the pluralism and diversity of the American experience as a whole were hardly captured by the limited focus we chose to adopt. Our intentions were of a more modest and exploratory nature, and we hope that people familiar with the ongoing discussion of the role of religious ideas in American life will find that the framework selected provides at least a plausible starting point for an undertaking of this kind.

Outlooks in tension

To establish a context for the conference's scholarly presentations, and for the reader of this volume as well, there were two introductory addresses, representing both sectors of the academy from which participants were drawn. In the essays that follow, they now appear as the first and last chapters, respectively. Coming from the tradition of university history and fully aware of the gulf that divides its practitioners from the scholarly work under way within the divinity schools, Henry May writes autobiographically of the problems entailed in the treatment of religious ideas as elements within what were thought to be the broader conventions of intellectual history at Berkeley. As an example of what he called the "vitalizing argument" between secular and religious outlooks on American history, he discussed the importance for his own scholarly work of the writings of Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr, both of whom were influential in loosening the grip of the secular, progressive synthesis in which he had been trained.

David Tracy addressed the conference as a theologian, and in his remarks, which appear as an afterword to the volume, he took up the special problems, both conceptual and institutional, that beset the theological enterprise in the contemporary United States, and speculated upon changes that might improve the situation. Unlike scholars in other fields, theologians need to keep constantly in mind the bearing of their work on three distinct publics, each with different problems, interests, capacities, and limitations for understanding trends in religious thought: the academy, the church, and the general public in all its pluralistic exfoliation. Suggesting that theology ought to be viewed not as a specialized and denominationally oriented inquiry but rather as one of the liberal arts, Tracy presented a case for moving theology out of the restrictive confines of the divinity schools and into a new place in the faculties of arts and

sciences. Citing the widespread phenomenon in the 1950s and 1960s of "atheists for Niebuhr" as an example of cultural encounter occurring across deep-seated boundaries of philosophical outlook that might offer a valuable lesson on how to deal with the divisive realities of cultural pluralism, Tracy suggested an approach to theology as a liberal art based on the interpretive treatment of the classics of the various traditions. He argued for the understanding of culture itself as a "conversation" in which theology has its proper place.

Historical contexts

The essays that are collected in this volume take up various aspects of the historical response in traditionalist, modernist, and naturalist circles to the challenge brought by the new scientific and scholarly ways of thinking. George Marsden concisely reviews the relationship between science and religion in nineteenth-century America and analyzes the principal subsequent reactions within the community of conservative evangelicalism to the implications of scientific naturalism. He also discusses the "mini-renaissance" that has occurred within the world of conservative evangelicalism since 1950, and describes the main features of its institutional and intellectual context.

By way of contrast, David Hollinger offers a portrait not of religious thinkers coping with the challenge of scientific method to established belief, but rather of a group of scientific intellectuals taking the language of religious experience and appropriating it to express—and indeed to exalt—the ethical aspects of scientific inquiry, in which the quest for objectivity, so central to the scientific pursuit, entails the transcendence of undisciplined, subjective impulses. While steering clear of the philosophical or theological status of what he calls "the intellectual gospel," to suggest its parallels with the reform-oriented social gospel movement within liberal Protestantism in the same period, which was adapting for its own uses the influence then pouring in from the surrounding scientific culture, Hollinger draws attention to the religiosity of the ethic and the prevalence of the idealistic construction of science that it represented. His account supplements the more familiar ones that highlight the conceptual challenges of science to Christianity. In concentrating on one aspect of the moral challenge of scientific method to Christian doctrine, Hollinger depicts a widespread form of naturalist piety in late-nineteenth-century America, comparable in many ways to the tradition of British agnosti-

cism that was then so important in informing contemporary culture. The existence and earnestness of the type of outlook Hollinger examines make it easier to appreciate the relatively smooth and sudden rise of naturalism to hegemonic status within the university, and to sympathize with Marsden's evangelicals, who, like most of the modernists, did not appreciate the scope of the challenge of naturalism until it was fully established at the center of things.

William King offers a new reading—and an important clarification of older readings—of one of the principal episodes in Protestant modernism in America: the theological status, conceptual character, and historical influence of the social gospel movement. As King points out, the most accessible views of the social gospel are based on stereotypes inherited from adversaries of the movement: from religious conservatives who saw it as theologically shallow, destined for a brief career as a minor waystation on the road to naturalism, or from the naturalists, who saw it as a tepid and selective expression of loyalty to tradition, and a tradition that was essentially prescientific and philosophically anemic in any case.

King sees the social gospel not as the last gasp of theological liberalism but as evidence for the continuing importance (throughout the first third of this century) of theological reflection for intellectuals in Protestant circles, and as a major source of influence on contemporary religious thought. From this new perspective, the social gospel is not displaced by neoorthodoxy, as earlier accounts have held, but rather gives birth to neoorthodoxy as a form of self-critical liberalism. Although engaged in the same quest for a new, personalist position on experience that preoccupied other movements of thought in its day, King's social gospel is theologically sophisticated—aware amid all the confusions over immanence and transcendence that the basic issue remained the reality of God. Thus the movement appears to have been not so much a reaction to European neoorthodoxy as an indigenous development, a response to the naturalists with their functional and psychological understandings of religion.

Dewey and the Niebuhrs

Other essays in this book deal with the continuing cultural influence of both naturalism and Protestant liberalism by examining biographically the principal recent exemplars of each viewpoint—John Dewey on the one hand and the Niebuhr brothers on the other. Dewey's is the paradig-

matic case and embodiment of the kind of secularization that the traditionalists predicted and the modernists feared. His career represents the dogged pursuit and systematic elaboration of the intellectual gospel that Hollinger has identified. In his treatment of Dewey, Bruce Kuklick examines the theological origins of Dewey's instrumentalism in the world of late-nineteenth-century New England Congregationalism; identifies the shift that so many intellectuals would undergo from theology to philosophy; describes the abandonment of religious language and its replacement by a new, scientific vocabulary; and discusses how the resulting philosophical naturalism became a common cultural assumption associated with pragmatic liberalism in the American political tradition.

In his essay on two of the leading adversaries of Dewey's instrumentalism, Richard Fox develops a case study of the continued potency of liberal Protestantism by examining the contrasting but compatible and convergent ideas on religion and society held by Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr. In so doing he confirms the basic thrust of William King's treatment of the social gospel as a theological incubator for a new style of critical religious thought. In the positions staked out by Fox and King, the familiar distinctions among the social gospel, theological liberalism, and neoorthodoxy are collapsed, with the continuities in thought and value among them emphasized instead.

The rest of the essays in this volume deal in historical terms with the university, religious thought, and thought *about* religion. Noting that there are no Niebuhrs or Tillichs on the academic scene at the moment, Van Harvey discusses what he considers the intellectual marginality of contemporary academic theology in America by examining its peculiar institutional setting. Rather than attributing the neglect of religious thought to the blanket term *secularization,* as is often done, Harvey suggests it is more useful to think in terms of some combination of the mistaken course of professionalization, which normally conceived theology as if it were merely a minister's arcanum, and to specialization and role change resulting from the rise of other disciplines, all of which were added to the original and intractable conceptual challenges to theological reflection presented in the nineteenth century.

Murray Murphey's essay breaks new ground and opens up for scholarly appraisal the course and content of the scientific treatment of religion as an object of study over the past century. Concentrating on the disciplines of anthropology, psychology, and sociology, Murphey outlines the principal achievements, influences, turning points, and short-

comings of work in each area. His analysis makes clear the enduring importance of the nineteenth-century encounter with scientific theories of evolution, and details its continuing effects in the evolutionary thematics that extend downward through time in the writings of Talcott Parsons, Anthony F. C. Wallace, Robert Bellah, and Clifford Geertz. In isolating and laying out for study this aspect of the naturalist heritage that has developed in the traditions of social scientific inquiry, Murphey makes an important contribution to our understanding of religion in the history of American thought.

Suggestions for further inquiry

This volume, then, is the work of many people, and given the diversity of experience, interest, and viewpoint represented by the authors whose work is included within it, perhaps it will come as no surprise to the reader that no firm consensus emerges about the current status of religious thought as an element in the culture of American elites. There are, however, a few points of convergence, or perhaps tacit agreement, on lines of inquiry that might repay further investigation.

In thinking about belief and the requirements for useful descriptions of it, there are, of course, deep problems of method and the meaning of terms and relationships to be encountered. As Murphey suggests at the close of his paper, perceived difficulties in the tradition of the scientific study of religion have less to do with problems of empirical data, as conventionally understood, than with inadequacies in the underlying philosophical premises regarding the scope and limits of the empirical itself as a category of experience. A more sophisticated and robust understanding of the empirical is clearly in order. And if studies in the scientific tradition are to get beyond the current impasse, the circularities of merely functional and psychological explanations also might be addressed by dealing more directly with sensitive matters of doctrine, the role of ideas in systems of belief, and the grounds for particular ideas.

Another point has to do with the institutional context within which matters of belief are discussed and appraised. Perhaps the reluctance to focus on questions of doctrine—whether modernist, naturalist, or traditionalist—is encouraged by the institutional arrangements that have become established in the American university. Although it is admittedly difficult to imagine circumstances different from those that now prevail, there was a suggestion at the conference that it may be appropriate in the