

The Spirit of American Liberal Theology

A History

Gary Dorrien

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Contents

Preface and Acknowledgments	xi
1. Liberal Theology in England, Germany, and the USA	1
Room for Reason: John Locke, Joseph Butler, and British Liberalism	5
German Liberal Theology: Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schleiermacher, G. W. F. Hegel, and the Ritschlian School	15
Inventing American Liberal Theology	23
Modernist Liberalisms: Enlightenment and Evangelical	26
Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Liberation Theology	29
2. Transcendental Intuitions and Abolitionist Disruptions	33
William Ellery Channing and the Divine Likeness	36
Hosea Ballou and the Gospel of Salvation	39
Unitarian Christianity	42
Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Post-Kantian Idealism	48
American Transcendentalism	53
3. Horace Bushnell and the Metaphors of Inspiration	71
Language, Christ, and the Trinity	84
Nature, Supernature, and Sacrifice	90
4. Romantic Feminism and the New Theology	101
Henry Ward Beecher, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Feminist Religion	108
A Bible for Women: The Idea of Feminist Religion	116
Theodore Munger, Newman Smyth, and the New Theology	120
5. Social Gospel Progressivism	131
Washington Gladden and the Social Gospel	132
Walter Rauschenbusch and Social Gospel Socialism	140
Richard R. Wright Jr. and the Black Social Gospel	151
6. The Evangelical Liberal Gospel	161
Charles A. Briggs, Biblical Criticism, and the Imaginary Bible	161

The Liberal Gospel: William Adams Brown and William Newton Clarke	171
Harry Emerson Fosdick and the Religion of Personality	182
7. Personal Idealism as Theology	195
Borden Parker Bowne and Personal Idealism	196
Ernst Troeltsch and the Theology of Religion	205
Albert C. Knudson, Edgar S. Brightman, and the Personalist School	210
Personalism and God in Process	219
Walter Muelder and Third-Generation Personalism	229
8. Naturalistic Empiricism as Process Theology	235
Shailer Mathews and the Early Chicago School	235
Theological Realism: Douglas Clyde Macintosh and Henry Nelson Wieman	247
Charles Hartshorne and Dipolar Theism	257
Bernard E. Meland: Mystical Naturalism and the New Metaphysics	260
9. Dialectical Theology on Liberal Terms	269
Reinhold Niebuhr, American Protestantism, World War I, and the Social Gospel	270
Paul Tillich, German Crisis, Kairos, and Religious Socialism	273
Immoral Society and Stupid Idealism	283
Tillich's American Career	295
Legacies of Tillich and Niebuhr	302
10. The Radical Martin Luther King Jr.: Personalist Socialism, Antimilitarism, and Black Power	305
True Religion, Mystical Unity, and the Disinherited: Howard Thurman	306
The Radical King: Personalist Socialism, Antimilitarism, and Black Power	321
Personality, Human and Divine	336
11. Liberal-Liberation and Ecofeminism	341
J. Deotis Roberts and Black Theology	342
Feminist Liberation Ecotheology: Rosemary Radford Ruether	353
Metaphors of the Divine Body: Sallie McFague	365
12. Theologizing Whiteheadian Creative Transformation	375
In the Spirit of Whitehead: John B. Cobb Jr.	376
Anglo-Catholic Whiteheadian Theology: W. Norman Pittenger	380
Cobb and Creative Transformation	385
Theodicy, Divine Power, and Panexperience: David Ray Griffin	393
Seeing the Whiteheadian World: Marjorie H. Suchocki	402

13. In a Catholic Analogical Spirit	409
Wide Ecumenical Theology in the Making: Gregory Baum	410
David Tracy and the Analogical Imagination	418
She Who Is: Elizabeth A. Johnson	433
14. Constructing Naturalistic Humanizing Theologies	443
Theology as Imaginative Naturalistic Construction	447
Farley-Schleiermacher-Husserl and Hodgson-Hegel-Heidegger	455
The Christ of Chalcedon and the God of Creation	466
Third-Wave Womanist Reconstruction	473
15. After the Unnoticed Renaissance	479
The Second Coming of the Liberal Jesus	488
Ecofeminist Whiteheadian Poststructuralist Becoming	490
Theologizing Divine Creativity, Diversity, and Relation	501
Notes	511
Index	627

Preface and Acknowledgments

This book is an interpretation of the entire US American tradition of liberal theology. Its core is a highly condensed summary of my trilogy *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, published by Westminster John Knox Press in 2001, 2003, and 2006; but everything in that trilogy is newly written in this summary, and many things here are wholly new. The discussions of English and German liberalism are frontloaded to the opening chapter, the Universalists get their due, my argument about the Black social gospel is amplified, the narrative extends to 2022, and my post-Hegelian liberal-liberationist perspective is expressed. Above all, being reduced to one book helps me to feature the argument that I pressed last time only in volume 3: The most abundant, diverse, and persistent tradition of liberal theology is the one that blossomed in the USA and is still refashioning itself.

When I began writing the trilogy in 1998, my beloved, wise-cracking, Presbyterian minister spouse Brenda Biggs was in the eighth year of her brave fight for life, and my daughter Sara Biggs Dorrien was in the sixth grade. We lost Brenda in 2000, yielding years of grieving and grace. Leaving our cherished friends in Kalamazoo, Michigan, was unthinkable until Sara headed to college in 2004. I completed the trilogy during my transition in 2005 to Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University in New York City. Writing the present book gave me periodic reminders that my previous pass at this subject labored through trauma and pulled me through it. The US American tradition of liberal theology holds a special place in my feeling for giving me a cascade of creative, energetic, flawed, luminous, and very human theologians to live with and write about. This book is a sustained engagement with an ongoing tradition of religious thinkers spread over nearly three centuries and always steering between overbelief and disbelief.

My acknowledgments begin with cherished friends from my Kalamazoo years who urged me to imagine leaving Kalamazoo: Lawrence Bryan, Richard Cook, James F. Jones Jr., Becca Kutz-Marks, Chuck Kutz-Marks, Christopher Latiolais, Laura Packard-Latiolais, Paula Pugh Romanaux, and Cindy Stravers. In New York, the cherished friends who grace my life and scour my manuscripts for howlers include Kelly Brown Douglas, Roger Haight, Catherine Keller, Serene Jones, John Thatamanil, Cornel West, Andrea White, and unforgettably for thirteen years, the late James H. Cone. My editor for the trilogy, Stephanie Egnotovich, was already a dear friend to me from two previous books when we tackled the trilogy. When volume 1 went to press, I was in no shape to ward off her aversion to short sentences, so that book tied many of

my short sentences to the preceding or succeeding sentences, producing run-on constructions I would never write. Stephanie said it's wrong to let readers take a breath! Afterward she let pass my rhythmic style in volumes 2 and 3. Her death in 2009 was a heartbreaking loss for many of us theology authors. I am deeply grateful for this book to Editor-in-Chief Robert A. Ratcliff, who said yes immediately; to acquisitions editor Daniel Braden, who has now worked with me superbly on five books; copyeditor David Garber, who is wondrously diligent and learned; and to proofreader Tina E. Noll, who is a splendidly skillful reader.

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Joseph Regenstein Library, University of Chicago, with thanks to Alice Schreyer, Director of the Special Collections Research Center, and Daniel Meyer, Associate Director. (14) I also gratefully acknowledge use of correspondence with the following and thank each one: Gregory Baum, John B. Cobb Jr., William Dean, Sheila Davaney, Mary Doak, Langdon Gilkey, David Ray Griffin, Roger Haight, Peter Hodgson, Tyron Inbody, Gordon D. Kaufman, Robert Neville, Richard Norris, J. Deotis Roberts, Jerome A. Stone, and Marjorie Suchocki.

1. Liberal Theology in England, Germany, and the USA

The richest and most variegated tradition of liberal Christian theology is the US American one. Liberal theology has forerunner roots stretching back in England to the 1660s and in the USA to the 1750s. It was formally founded in the 1760s in Germany, and in all three contexts it was the idea of a *third way* between orthodox authority religion and skeptical disbelief. Wherever liberal theology bloomed, it was defined by six things: (1) navigating the third way, (2) insisting on the right to intellectual freedom, (3) accepting biblical criticism, (4) allowing science to explain the physical world, (5) looking beyond the church for answers, and (6) seeking to be relevant to the modern world. In England, liberal theology had a notable but patchy history up to the doorstep of World War I, jostling with an august state church and a caustic tradition of deist debunkers. In Germany, liberal theology had a highly distinguished intellectual run until it crashed just after World War I. In the colonies of New England and the mid-Atlantic, liberal theology had humbler beginnings, which yielded a seventh plank, social gospel activism, and a bountiful legacy.

England was a colossal empire dating back to its war victories against the Dutch, French, and Spanish under the Stuart kings of the seventeenth century. It had barely stepped onto the world stage when the sixteenth century expired, yet by 1650, England had caught up to Portugal and Spain as a dominant player in the spectacularly evil transatlantic slave trade. By the early nineteenth century, England was by far the world's foremost economic power and its most aggressive colonizer, though its loss of the American colonies helped to spur an abolitionist movement back home. For all its imperial might and reach, England had only four universities, none of which recognized theology as a university discipline or expected professors to produce original scholarship. Germany aspired to imperial might long before it became an empire in 1871 under Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. In Germany, liberal theology had a storied history, reflecting the strengths of a German invention, the modern research university, and a burgeoning intellectual culture of iconic thinkers and artists. German liberal theology boasted influential schools of thought featuring a Prussian nationalistic bent, plus leading figures named after Kings Friedrich and Wilhelm, before and after it became a colonizer of latter-day Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, Namibia, Cameroon, Gabon, Congo, Central African Republic, Chad, Nigeria, Togo, Ghana, New Guinea, and other territories.

By contrast, colonial America and the emergent USA were federated assortments of settler immigrants lacking much of an intellectual culture, touting their purportedly nonimperial mentality, and cursed with the abhorrent system

of chattel slavery that European colonializers imposed on the so-called New World. Among the three founding national traditions of liberal theology, only in the USA did pastors play the founder roles, emphasizing the spiritual concerns of congregations. Only in the USA and Canada did liberal theologians wholly embrace the activist conscience of the social gospel movement, making social-justice activism an important aspect of liberal theology. Only in the USA did theologians persistently fashion creative new liberal theologies in every decade after World War I, rethinking what liberal theology should become in response to Protestant neo-orthodoxy, the Great Depression, Catholic neo-Thomism, transcendental Thomism, the Cold War, the civil rights movement, Vatican Council II, liberation theology, second-wave feminism, postmodernity, queer theory, neoliberalism, the Black Lives Matter movement, and a global ecological crisis. American liberal theologians in the USA rightly contended that their tradition is worth saving since there must be an alternative to authoritarian religion and atheistic disbelief.¹

Theology is first-order discourse about matters of religious truth. It ventures into the perilous, cognitive, normative, existential work of adjudicating whatever concerns us ultimately, drawing upon meta-level fields such as history of religion and psychology of religion, but aiming at what is religiously true, making claims about things that individuals and religious communities care about sufficiently to stake their lives upon. Theology can be wrong, but it cannot be neutral, being inherently prescriptive. Until the modern era, every Christian theology operated within a house of authority. The external authority of the Bible and Christian tradition established what had to be believed about very specific things. Roman Catholic doctrine placed an infallible Bible within a tripartite structure of authority that included an ongoing church tradition and the teaching office of the papal magisterium, which itself was declared in 1870 to be infallible when it invokes its infallibility. Sixteenth-century Lutheranism and Calvinism enshrined the Bible alone as the rule of faith, after which Protestant scholastics raised the bar on what it means to say that the Bible is infallible, developing stringent theories of inerrancy. Liberal theology, first and foremost, was and is the enterprise that broke away from authority-based religious thinking.

Liberal theologians variously rejected or relativized the external authority of Scripture and tradition. They invented the critical methods of modern theological scholarship, which ended the centuries-long antagonism between theology and science, which reestablished the credibility of theology as an intellectual enterprise. But the identification of liberal theology with academic rationality, modern cultural progress, and in Germany the German Empire, set liberal theology up for a mighty fall. World War I destroyed the prestige of Germany's liberal Protestant theological establishment without ending the leadership role of German scholarship in modern theology. German and Germanic Swiss theologians still dominated theology after World War I, but not as liberals. In the USA, the Great Depression occasioned a similar cultural upheaval. The liberal approach to theology has been on the defensive ever since, never ruling the field again as it did in its pre-World War I heyday, constantly charged, often justly, with deferring overmuch to modern, secular, scientific, colonizing, bourgeois culture.

Historically and logically, the cornerstone of liberalism is the assertion of the supreme value of the individual, an idea rooted in Pauline theology and the Magna Carta Libertatum of 1215, which passed into Renaissance humanism. In all its historic forms, liberalism makes a defining appeal to the rights of freedom. As a political philosophy it originated in the seventeenth century as the threefold claim that individuals have natural rights to freedom, the state must prevent the tyranny of the mob, and religion must be separate from politics. As an economic theory it arose in the eighteenth century as a defense of free trade and self-regulating capitalist markets. As a cultural tradition it arose in the eighteenth century as a rationalistic ethic of autonomy and humanism. In liberal ideology, all traditions are open to criticism, state power is justified only to the extent that it protects individual liberty, and the universal goal of human beings is to realize their freedom.

These principles defined liberalism wherever capitalism spread, yielding liberal theologies that affirmed modern humanism, biblical criticism, and Enlightenment philosophy. England had the first trickle of theologies of a liberalizing sort and a nineteenth-century tradition of not quite full-fledged liberal theology. The distinctly Anglican approach to the authority question—conceiving Scripture, tradition, and reason as interlocking authorities—both encouraged and restrained a mildly liberal trend in English Anglicanism. Germany produced distinguished liberal theologies and movements that propagated them. The USA sprouted currents of liberal religious rationalism, Universalism, Unitarianism, and Romantic idealism, but no ecumenical movement of liberal theology until the end of the nineteenth century. By the time that England and the USA developed significant movements of liberal theology, liberalism itself had morphed into liberal democracy under pressure from democratic movements, variously contesting older traditions of liberal individualism and elitism.

Religion was distinctly troublesome for the founders of liberal ideology, who coped with the trouble by inventing the modern idea of “religion” as a self-enclosed realm of piety and belief. To the liberal traditions associated in England with John Locke and in Germany with Immanuel Kant, the liberal state was naturally tolerant via a rational social contract. The state existed to protect the natural rights of citizens, while religion had to be constrained by modern rationality and pushed to the political sideline—except for whatever moral support it rendered to the modern state. In England, the Erastian wing of the Broad Church liberal tradition offered zealous support of the modern state. In Germany, virtually every tradition of liberal theology was exuberantly patriotic, which led to the fateful Culture Protestant nationalism of the Ritschlian School. In the USA, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin espoused a secularizing liberalism that kept religion in a sideline box, while Jeffersonians competed with a latter-day Puritan tradition prizing faith and religious liberty. The holdover neo-Puritans in the USA planted the theocratic seed of social gospel liberalism by contending that the state has a sacred duty to protect liberty. All these liberal traditions betrayed their own rhetoric of freedom because liberalism arose not only as tolerant relief from Europe’s wars over religion, but also as an ideological justification of capitalism and a defense of White supremacy. The champions of liberal ideology carved exceptions to their rhetoric of

universal human dignity for all racial, sexual, and cultural groups marked as inferior and thus not meriting the rights of “civilization.” Liberals capitulated to prior bigotries and invented some of their own, justifying slavery and the extermination of First Nation civilizations, and designing a supposedly natural political economy based on self-interested market exchanges that served the interests of the capitalist class.

The liberal state tolerated plural religious traditions, posing as a guarantor of the rights of individuals and communities to pursue diverse interests, while routinely reserving rights of citizenship and humanity to White, male owners of property. Some liberals stoutly opposed the hypocrisy and injustice of privileged liberalism, demanding the rights of liberalism for all citizens. In England and the USA they were lodestars of the neo-abolitionist and anti-imperialist movements, but had to be called radical liberals or liberal socialists to distinguish them from what liberalism usually meant. Liberalism was better known for protecting capitalism, colonialism, and White supremacy than for defending the oppressed and vulnerable.²

Modern theology arose as an aspect of this story. It began, quite literally, when people began to search for the sacred—a modern phenomenon. For most of human history, the sacred was readily available. Cultures were organized around the sacred observances of a cult, which provided rituals and myths of birth, life, identity, community, sexuality, work, redemption, and death. The real world was the realm of the gods, whose history shaped human history. People did not talk about their lives as journeys in search of the sacred. They did not ask how their myths disclosed spiritual meaning. They understood history as myth and themselves as participants in sacred time and space. Modern science demythologized the sacred cosmos, turning religion into a private option for individuals. The sacred underpinnings of culture in cult were deconstructed to expose its configurations of desire and power. Culture had no attachment to a sacred realm but was real precisely as human work. Enlightenment thinkers said the inductive methods of science should be applied to all fields of inquiry, including religion. If rationality is the only valid authority in science or philosophy, no respectable claim to religious truth can be secured by appealing to an authoritative scripture, church, or tradition.

The founders of modern theology took these verdicts very seriously. In the Bible, God created the world in six days, the fall occurred in a real space-time Eden, and God spoke audibly to living persons and intervened directly in history. In modern consciousness the world of the Bible was obliterated and the mythical aspects of biblical narrative became embarrassing to religious people. Early Enlightenment rationalists took the Bible as a flat text and corrected it from the standpoint of their naturalistic worldview. They exposed discrepant accounts and harmonized them; rejected miracle stories and offered naturalistic explanations; stressed that the Bible contains myths and deduced rational systems from the Bible. Generally, they conceived of interpretation as taxonomy.

A bit later, in the 1760s, German scholars Johann Semler, Johann Eichhorn, Johann Jakob Griesbach, and Johann David Michaelis made a course correction by deconstructing the history of the text itself. These founders of historical criticism proposed to study the Bible from a scientific standpoint stripped of

dogmatic presuppositions. They revolutionized biblical scholarship by deciphering the historical development of the Bible. Despite having no nation, they had far more historical consciousness than scholars from the mighty nations of England and France. The German historical critics were the first to call themselves “liberal theologians,” until Immanuel Kant burst into prominence in the early 1780s, after which they called themselves Kantians. In the strict sense of the term insisted upon by Kantian theologians, they were the only true liberal theologians throughout the nineteenth century. But conventional usage was more generous and accurate. In the broad senses of both terms, “liberal” and “modern” became interchangeable names in theology during the long reign of German liberal theology.³

Room for Reason: John Locke, Joseph Butler, and British Liberalism

There was already an ample tradition of liberal theological forerunners in colonial America when the Germans invented historical criticism and liberal theology. The American forerunners had no inkling that Germans were about to dominate their field. To them the Enlightenment was English, Scottish, and French. German universities, and the German language, were just beginning to acquire respect when Kant began his career in 1755. There was no “Germany”; there was only a grab bag of principalities more or less held together by the so-called Holy Roman Empire. Little intellectual life had arisen in Germany between the Peace of Westphalia (1648) and Kant’s birth in 1724. England was the world’s dominant power, exercising direct influence on the German lands through its possession of Hanover.

The American forerunners were Congregational rationalists who called themselves New England Arminians, believing that God’s sovereignty is compatible with human free will, as contended by sixteenth-century Dutch Reformed theologian Jacobus Arminius. Biblical criticism was not the issue for the New England Arminians. They sought to alleviate a regnant Calvinist orthodoxy of its harshness, negotiating their own Puritan heritage. To make rational sense of Christianity, they looked to English Enlightenment Anglicans, especially Locke, a revered figure, and to Locke’s leading successors, especially Anglican theologian Joseph Butler.

Locke is an epochal figure who surpassed all others as a founder of modern liberal thought. Born in 1632 and raised in Puritan Calvinism, he watched his father, an attorney, ride off with the Parliamentary cavalry during the Civil War that yielded the Puritan governments of the 1650s. Locke was educated at Westminster School, England’s top boarding school, where flogging was common and the sermons were Puritan. He excelled in Latin and Greek, developed Monarchist sympathies, and later excelled at Christ’s Church, Oxford, in the standard Arts curriculum of classics, grammar, rhetoric, logic, geometry, and moral philosophy. On the side, Locke read Descartes, absorbing his rationalistic method of doubt, which led Locke to physical science and, subsequently, a career in medicine. In 1667 he became personal physician to a prominent politician, Lord Anthony Ashley Cooper, at the time Chancellor of the Exchequer under Charles II, later the first Earl of Shaftesbury.⁴

Entering Shaftesbury's world of dignitaries, wealth, high culture, and political maneuvering was the turning point of Locke's life. Shaftesbury was a high-powered founder of the Whig party, a moral philosopher, and the ringleader of the Exclusionist movement that sought to prevent Charles II's Roman Catholic brother James Stuart from succeeding to the English throne. Locke absorbed the ethos and causes of Shaftesbury's inner circle while retaining, for thirty years, the status of a senior student at Oxford. In 1668 Locke became a Fellow of the newly founded Royal Society, forging friendships with Isaac Newton (1642–1727), a mathematics professor at Trinity College, Cambridge; and Robert Boyle (1627–91), the founder of modern chemistry. Above all, Locke pondered the discussions of morality and religion in Shaftesbury's circle: "After we had a while puzzled ourselves, without coming any nearer a Resolution of those Doubts which perplexed us, it came into my Thoughts, that we took a wrong course; and that, before we set ourselves upon Enquiries of that Nature, it was necessary to examine our own Abilities, and see, what Objects our Understanding were, or were not fitted to deal with."⁵

Poring over authoritative texts to solve intellectual and moral problems no longer worked. Locke resolved to start anew, taking no tradition on faith. Instead of making judgments about things by consulting a tradition of opinions about them, he would study the things themselves and the capacity of human reason to understand them, tracing the empirical origins of ideas. For almost twenty years Locke puzzled over the epistemological problem, writing scraps of thoughts and digressions, while taking two exiles for safety's sake.

Shaftesbury pushed for the Exclusion bill of 1679 that would have removed James Stuart from the line of succession to the English throne. Charles II feared it might pass, so he dissolved the parliament. Later there was another Exclusion bill in another parliament, which Charles also dissolved. The same thing happened two more times, while public opinion swung in the king's favor; he was usually more popular than Parliament anyway. In 1681, Shaftesbury was prosecuted unsuccessfully for treason and fled to Holland for safety. Locke fled to exile in France and Holland, while Charles called no more Parliaments before dying in 1685. On his deathbed, the king was received into the Roman Catholic Church. James succeeded him to the English and Irish thrones as James II and to the Scottish throne as James VII. His divine right to be king was generally accepted, but his Roman Catholicism was widely feared and resented.

The English and Scottish Parliaments opposed nearly everything that James II tried to do. In 1688 the birth of his son James and the prosecution of seven Anglican bishops for seditious libel set off a crisis in England. Now there was a prospect of a Roman Catholic dynasty. Seven English nobles took the drastic step of inviting William of Orange (William III, the Prince of Orange) to invade their country and take the throne. He had married the eldest daughter of James II, William's cousin Mary, who had been raised Anglican at the behest of Charles II. The birth of Mary's brother James threatened her right to succeed her father as sovereign. In November 1688, William invaded England, where the disaffected army and navy had already gone over to him. In February 1689 the Convention Parliament of England called by William offered the crown to William III and Mary II as joint sovereigns. England called it "the

Glorious Revolution” because nobody got killed, Parliament became the governing authority, and the dreaded “Roman Catholic threat” was dispelled.⁶

The Glorious Revolution allowed Locke to come home. He was fifty-seven years old and little published. Locke had labored for nearly thirty years on *A Letter concerning Toleration*, for twenty years on *Essay on Human Understanding*, and for ten years on *Two Treatises of Government*. All were published in 1689. *Essay* bore his name, while the others remained anonymous until his death; Locke acknowledged his authorship in his will. Disciplined, cautious, mild-mannered, and a bachelor who kept extremely detailed records of his financial affairs, Locke probably sought to shield himself from personal attacks by publishing his most controversial books anonymously, which did not prevent him from becoming very famous.⁷

The *Essay* complemented the towering work of his friend Newton, *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687). Newton devastated metaphysical systems based on Aristotle, arguing from definitions and mathematical axioms that the universe is a closed system, with universal physical laws. Material bodies interact according to laws of motion concerning the uniformity of motion, change of motion, and mutuality of action. Absolute time, space, place, and motion are independent quantities constituting an absolute framework for measure. The *Principia* and *Essay* were hailed as revolutionary contributions to understanding that culminated a century of scientific progress. Newton was a devout Anglican and Whig who believed in God mostly because he admired the mathematical order of creation. Privately, he and Locke stewed over the doctrine of the Trinity, believing that the fourth-century church made a mistake in imposing it on Christianity. But going public with this belief was out of play for Newton, who prized his chair at Cambridge, and for Locke, who guarded his reputation and Anglican standing. Locke courted all the controversy he could stand in the *Essay*. Book I contended that the mind has no innate ideas. Book II argued that all ideas are products of sensory experience or reflection on experience. Book III wrestled with the problem that language hinders all attempts to lay hold of reality. Book IV described the empirical method of analyzing and making judgments about evidence.⁸

Locke argued that the mind works on its ideas of sensation and reflection through the operations of combination, division, generalization, and abstraction. On ideas, he was an empiricist, reasoning that ideas are mental objects. On knowledge, he was a rationalist, contending that knowledge is a product of reason working out the connections between ideas, not something produced directly by our senses. On substance, he believed that things possess a substratum that support their properties. Everything, Locke taught, that exists or occurs in a mind is an idea, or includes one. All human knowledge is founded on ideas, which are acquired by natural faculties, the innate powers of mind. An idea is the immediate object of a mind in the act of thinking. It exists in the mind’s intellectual faculty, the understanding, as distinguished from the mind’s volitional faculty, and is always an object of thought or perception. The idea of God is not innate in the mind but is acquired by any mind that seriously reflects on the created order.⁹

George Berkeley, Samuel Clarke, David Hume, Francis Hutcheson, Immanuel Kant, and James Mill philosophized in the Lockean mode, conceiving

philosophy as theorizing about the elements, combinations, and associations of experience, asking how perceptions are filtered through the mind's innate capacities that arrange them into ideas. In political philosophy Locke's intellectual legacy was equally immense. He made the early Enlightenment's signature case for religious toleration as well as historic arguments for the natural freedom and equality of human beings, government by consent, majority rule, the right of revolution, separation of legislative and executive powers, and the rights to life, liberty, and property.

Locke argued that true faith cannot be forced and that no ruler or church holds the requisite understanding or right to impose a specific religion on anyone. Saving souls is not the business of the state, which must distinguish between itself and the church, allowing wide berth to religious freedom. The state is a society of individuals constituted to protect the life, liberty, and property of individuals and the public order, while churches are voluntary societies of individuals devoted to worshipping God. The church should pose no threat to the state, and the state should not interfere in the affairs of the church.¹⁰

Locke deeply admired and was indebted to Richard Hooker (1554–1600), the lodestar proto-Anglican theologian who bequeathed to the Church of England its three-stranded cord of Scripture, tradition, and reason. Hooker combined a Scholastic Thomist conception of rational theology and divine order with a Calvinist Protestantism shorn of Presbyterian polity and *sola scriptura* biblicism. His *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1594) made a natural law and proto-Anglican case against Puritan extremism, commendably to Locke. Locke cited Hooker sixteen times in *Two Treatises*, usually in support of his own position. He refashioned Hooker's concept of a minimal creed, contending that it should be enough in England to believe that Jesus is essential to salvation. No one, Locke said, should be required to believe in bishops or a particular doctrine of atonement. If British churches could settle for coexistence based on a minimal creed, reunion would be possible, and killing over religion would stop. Hooker, however, was the theologian of the Elizabethan Settlement, conceiving the church as coextensive with the state or commonwealth. A century later, chastened by the Civil War, Puritan vengeance, and Anglican Restoration vengeance, Locke sought to tame the state church, calling for as much tolerance as he could imagine in a modern English republic. He said religious tolerance should be extended to all people who do not pledge allegiance to a foreign power, excluding atheists and Catholics, since they were said to be a danger to the state and its liberties.¹¹

The first *Treatise* demolished Robert Filmer's theory of absolute monarchy and the divine right of kings, denying that God made all people naturally subject to a monarch. The second *Treatise* made a natural law argument about natural freedom and equality, asking readers to imagine a group of human beings living in a state of nature lacking any government authority or private property. Locke reasoned that in the state of nature, all persons would have a duty to God not to harm any persons in their life, liberty, or goods, and would know through their power of reason that they had such duties. To be sure, some would grab power overzealously and others would lack power to defend their rights. This fact of human nature yielded concepts of political obligation, bringing people together to develop governing authorities to resolve certain defects

in the state of nature. Locke reflected that people leave the state of nature to set up governments in order to counter the sinful tendency of human beings to violate the rights of others to their personhood, labor, and goods. Consent is crucial to the process, since governments rest on the relinquishment, to some degree, of natural freedoms. When a government fails to protect the natural rights of the people, they have a right to replace it, even by revolution.¹²

Locke was rarely quotable, but one of his rare quotable sentences imagined colonial America as something close to Eden: "In the beginning all the world was *America*, and more so than it is now." In the state of nature, he imagined, as in America, the most valuable things were generally of short duration. Locke's English America story did not begin with John Hawkins and Francis Drake—seadog predators with Royal backing who came to sell enslaved Africans, plunder Spanish ships and settlements, and steal gold. It began with sturdy Puritans who came to work the land and practice their liberty-loving faith. Locke said that persons become the rightful owners of something by mixing their labor with it, a condition that supposedly disqualified the indigenous peoples of Edenic America. The things of the world belong to God, he allowed, but persons own their own labor by virtue of their God-given powers. When they mix these powers of labor with unowned things, they become the rightful owners of the things, unless they freely contract their labor to someone else.¹³

Until the twentieth century, most interpreters believed that Locke wrote the *Two Treatises* to justify the Glorious Revolution. In fact, they were written during the Exclusion Crisis and were probably intended to justify the revolutionary uprising against the Stuart monarchy. Locke on slavery is a minefield of contradictions and hypocrisy. He taught that every individual has a property in their own person, and in the second treatise he said that slavery was so vile he couldn't believe that any Englishman would argue for it. A century later, abolitionists quoted him in support of their novel cause. But Locke accepted the second classic justification of slavery—enslavement for prisoners captured in an unjust war; in *Constitutions of Carolina* (1669), he decreed that every free person of Carolina was to have absolute authority over their enslaved Black laborers; and he enriched himself off the slave trade. The Royal African Company (RAC), an English mercantile firm founded in 1660 by the royal Stuart family and London merchants to conduct business along the west coast of Africa, was led by the Duke of York, the later James II. Founded originally to exploit the gold fields along the Gambia River, it morphed into the leading player in the vilest business on earth, transporting more enslaved Africans to the Americas than any company engaged in the Atlantic slave trade. Locke was a major shareholder in it, along with Charles II, Shaftesbury, and composer George Friedrich Handel. Perhaps Locke's condemnation of slavery was just a ruse to discredit the House of Stuart. Or perhaps his hypocrisy burst the boundaries of rational explanation.¹⁴

On religion, he cleared room for natural theology and revealed theology by stressing that knowledge is very limited, while living rests mostly on beliefs. Locke proceeded in three epistemological steps: We know our own existence by intuition, we know that God exists by demonstration, and we know all other things by sensation. To Locke, the self's intuition of its own existence was self-evident; one's existence cannot be less evident than one's feeling of pleasure or pain. He moved directly from self-certainty to the certainty of God's existence.

Just as one cannot truly doubt one's existence, something cannot be produced by nothing. If we know there is some real being, something must have existed from eternity to produce it, since whatever was not from eternity had a beginning, and whatever had a beginning must have been produced by something else. Something must be from eternity.¹⁵

Locke reasoned that our lack of innate ideas makes us ignorant, but also leaves us hungry for knowledge. Lacking rational knowledge, we yearn for proofs. In search of certainty, we want clear and determined ideas, which elude us. Where we lack strong evidence, we want probability on our side. In religion, we must employ empirical reason as far as it takes us, until it no longer works, at which point we appeal to faith. Protestant orthodoxies taught that correct theologizing begins with biblical revelation. Locke countered that beginning with revelation is impossible: there is no such thing as a revealed idea. Any idea communicated in revelatory experience must exist in sensation or reflection before it can be heard as a revelatory word. Even Paul, transported to the third heaven, could not have expressed any new idea he received (2 Corinthians 12:2). Similarly, any truths that come to us through revelation must be discoverable by reason; otherwise, we could not understand them. Nothing that we receive in revelation can be clearer or utterly different from our own mental objects, our ideas.¹⁶

No one, Locke stressed, possesses enough knowledge to live by it. Knowledge is lacking in most areas of life, so we form beliefs and depend on them. Natural theology establishes its claims by deduction, making true claims to knowledge; but natural theology is too limited to support faithful living. Matters of revealed theology belong to the category of belief, and the best revealed theologies conform their beliefs to the strongest evidence. Locke studiously avoided any discussion of the Trinity. Conservative clerics blasted him for it, and deists wrongly claimed that Locke was surely a deist. Locke did not endorse the deist animus against everything smacking of transcendent mystery or revelation. He argued that revealed theology has an important role to play as long as it does not contradict reason. Reason does not grasp everything that is worth believing; meanwhile we must attain as much rational certainty as possible in an area where knowledge is usually lacking.

The *Essay* established Locke's philosophy of religion just before he became famous as the apologist of the new political order, which moved him to write more about religion, especially to distance himself from deists. In *The Reasonableness of Christianity as Delivered in the Scriptures* (1695), Locke said the divine authority of the Bible was not in question for him; only the rational meaning of scriptural teaching was in question. According to Locke, Christianity is about Christ's restoration of something lost by Adam. Two ways of construing this claim predominated in England, and Locke said both were wrong. The first turned Christianity into something unbelievable and repulsive by fixing the guilt of Adam onto all human beings. The second overreacted to orthodoxy by denying that the heart of the gospel is the need for personal redemption. The latter strategy reduced Jesus to a restorer of natural religion—the kind of thing Locke heard in elite society parlors.¹⁷

He argued that the Bible teaches a better doctrine of redemption than the hellfire threat concocted by the church. In the Bible, Adam fell from the state of righteousness and was expelled from paradise, a state of immortal living,

for disobeying God. Death was unknown before Adam sinned; afterward, all human beings were mortal and bound for death. Unfortunately, Christian orthodoxies took this death to be a state of imputed moral guilt such that all descendants of Adam deserved to be endlessly tormented in hell. Locke protested that this idea is strange and unbelievable in every way. It makes a mockery of the justice and goodness of God, loads a perversely inflated idea of death onto the simple idea expounded in the Bible, and is nonsense as morality and law. In the Bible, Locke contended, death is about ceasing to be, period. It is not an imputed guilt leading to eternal hellfire. The New Testament teaches that Christ, the second Adam, restores all human beings to life from the estate of death. The life to which all people are restored is the one they receive at the resurrection. There they recover from the death brought into the world by Adam, but the Bible never says that Adam's sin condemned all who are not saved. People are condemned only for their own sins of doing evil and rejecting the grace offered to them.¹⁸

Locke accepted the gospel portrayal of Jesus as a miracle-working Savior who called himself the Messiah and was raised from the dead. On his reading, Jesus was an original and spiritually compelling ethical teacher, the first to expound a moral doctrine upon self-evident principles of reason, which he deduced in all its parts by demonstration. This message constituted a revelation because it came from the miracle-working Savior sent by God. Here as elsewhere, Locke argued, the revelation is the primary thing, but not to the exclusion of reason. Philosophy did not save the world, despite centuries of Greek philosophizing. By the time of Jesus, philosophy was a spent force. Had philosophers done a better job, it wouldn't have mattered, because people need more than philosophy. They need a personal demonstration. Jesus changed everything by teaching and showing the way to God.¹⁹

Being reckoned a good Anglican was very important to Locke, who exemplified the liberalizing impulse in English theology, personifying rational religion. Many of his successors sought to quietly phase the Trinity out of Christian teaching in his fashion. Samuel Clarke (1675–1729), the leading British metaphysician and theologian of the generation between Locke and Berkeley, took a different tack, inviting trouble by interrogating the Athanasian orthodoxy of three persons, one God. In *The Scripture-Doctrine of the Trinity* (1712), Clarke surveyed the biblical basis of Athanasian doctrine, contending that the Bible ascribes dominion to God without describing God's metaphysical attributes. The ancient church, he argued, had a better option than Arianism (the Son of God was divine but not eternal), Socinianism (the Son was created at the conception of Jesus), Sabellianism (the Son was a mode of God), and the Athanasian formula it chose. The Church should have adopted the subordinationist position that each member of the Trinity is a person, but only the Father is self-existent. This position engulfed Clarke in a firestorm of accusation that took years to play out. He was repeatedly branded as an Arian, Socinian, or Sabellian heretic. Clarke escaped official censure, partly because he was the leading theological interpreter of Newtonian physics and one of Queen Anne's chaplains. But future British and American Unitarians took note: Clarke, the major Anglican theologian of the early eighteenth century, held a view of divine personality that could be construed as unitarian.²⁰

Locke had a similar legacy on the Anglican troika of Scripture, tradition, and reason. Like all Anglican theologians, he claimed to uphold it. Scripture is the paramount authority on all matters of faith and order and is the only source of doctrines necessary for salvation. Church tradition, especially the councils of the fourth and fifth centuries, guide the interpretation of Scripture. Reason shaped by Scripture, tradition, and sound learning arbitrates the interpretive process. Every Anglican theologian of the seventeenth century took this framework for granted. High Church conservatives like William Laud lifted church tradition above reason; liberal sacramentalists like Jeremy Taylor revered the church's catholic tradition while making reason the judge of it; liberal-leaning Anglican Protestants like William Chillingworth and Locke were cooler to patristic authority. All made a plausible claim to Hooker's legacy, forging an Anglican consensus around the threefold cord. But Locke's empirical concept of reason shriveled the Anglican cord in the name of preserving it. The pre-Lockean Anglican idea of reason was either critical, not constructive, as in Chillingworth's hermeneutical (interpretive) concept of it; or robustly Neoplatonist when constructive, as with the Cambridge Platonists; or a combination of hermeneutical and Hellenistic speculative impulses, as with Hooker.²¹

Locke's empiricism was more stringent and grounded, tracking the flow of the experience of things of sense. He discarded the Platonist theory of innate ideas and the Neoplatonist concept of transcendental reason that Anglican theologians held in common with their favorite fourth-century theologians. On the same grounds, Locke undermined the authority of orthodox Trinitarianism and Christology, which led to theologies that broke explicitly with both. He replaced transcendental Logos reason with scientific, probabilistic, empirical reason, until Samuel Taylor Coleridge revived the transcendental tradition in British theology, via post-Kantian idealism. Locke had critics in his time who charged that he aimed too low. A century later, the founders of American liberal theology resurrected this verdict against him, sometimes noting that even Locke's greatest theological successor, Anglican theologian Joseph Butler (1692–1752), said that Locke wrongly reduced religious thought to the plane of sense.

Butler grew up Presbyterian, converted to Anglicanism at twenty-two, cringed at the mediocrity of Oxford, got a plum post after Oxford at Rolls Chapel in London, and preached rarefied sermons to equity-court lawyers: Human nature is made for virtue, and the love of God links morals to natural religion. In 1736 he became head chaplain to Queen Caroline of Ansbach, who loved philosophy. The same year he published the greatest English theological work of the eighteenth century, *Analogy of Religion*. It went most of the way with Locke while holding out for a bit more mystery against a skeptical tide. By the 1730s there was much aggressive skepticism to refute. John Toland contended that true Christianity is completely rational and not mysterious. Matthew Tindal, dispensing with revelation, argued that Christianity is as old as the creation. Many writers denied the biblical miracles, casting Christian beliefs as stupid or perverse. Butler took them on in high-minded, majestic fashion, with no stylistic flourishes, reluctantly adding apologetics to the ministry he loved: preaching. Like Friedrich Schleiermacher, but over sixty years earlier, Butler spoke directly to an ascending culture of disbelief and derision: "It is come, I know not how, to be taken for granted, by many persons, that Christianity is

not so much as a subject of inquiry, but that it is now at length discovered to be fictitious." Deists had already passed from trying to persuade intelligent people to claiming that all intelligent people agreed with them. Butler ruefully observed that the task remaining for them was to get rid of Christianity, treating it "as a principal subject of mirth and ridicule, as it were by way of reprisals, for its having so long interrupted the pleasures of the world."²²

He countered that Christianity was still important, not something to be dismissed or ridiculed. There was "strong evidence" that the essential Christian doctrines are true: if one weighed the evidence carefully, one could not rest in an easy assurance that Christianity is not true. There is no alternative, Butler urged, to the probabilistic weighing of evidence, "even in matters of speculation." Probable evidence admits of degrees and is highly variable, ranging "from the highest moral certainty to the very lowest presumption." The book's title registered the close relationship between probability and likeness. Butler reasoned that whenever the mind seeks to determine whether something is probably true, it looks for a likeness between the questioned thing and something else considered to be true.²³

Analogy, the assertion or demonstration of a similarity, resemblance, or identity of relation between two things, was his chief mode of argument. Resemblances between appearances or figures of speech prove nothing, but resemblances involving a similarity or identity of relation appeal to reason. Butler's favorite analogies drew religious inferences from Newtonian science. Nature is uniform; nothing in nature is ever wasted or annihilated; thus, there is a strong probability that the soul is not annihilated either. In all areas except math and logic, reason must rely on probable evidence and analogy. Mathematical reasoning and logic are demonstrative, yielding certain conclusions that are virtually contained in the premises. Everywhere else, he argued, reason must reckon with probabilities. Reason depends on evidence, which is merely probable; and analogy, which is about likeness, not identity; and the standpoint of the knower, which is relative; and the intellectual capacity of the knower, which is limited. Butler implored disbelievers to be modest about what they do not know. Overbelief is a fault: probability is all we have, "the very guide of life."²⁴

He prized Origen's counsel that if one believes that the Author of nature inspired Scripture, one should expect to find similar problems in the Bible and nature. Deists pointed to flaws in the Bible to prove that God did not inspire it, yet they taught that God created the world. Atheists, judging that God is problematic too, tried to interpret the world with God left out. Butler warned that this is the downward path, leaving the unbeliever in meaningless confusion and absurdity. It is better to struggle with the problems of a Bible and world authored by God, for if natural and revealed religion are ridiculous, so is nature.²⁵

Butler conceived of Christianity as a specific description of something known to religion in general: the divine government of the world. The world is divinely created; human beings are appointed to live in a future state of reward or punishment for morally good or evil behavior; earthly existence is a probation or state of trial for the future life; human beings were granted an "additional dispensation of providence" to rescue them from wickedness; this dispensation will save all who accept revelation or sound argument. Christianity, in other

words, is the pure faith of natural religion purged of superstitions and historical corruptions. In natural religion, the world is the creation of an infinitely perfect Being, it exists under God's divine government, virtue is God's law, and God will judge human beings according to their righteousness. But pure religion was lost before Christ entered the world.²⁶

Like his deist opponents, Butler played up the close analogical relationship between Christianity and natural religion, while rejecting the deist polemic against revelation. He said that deists depended on Christ even as they pushed him aside. Christ came to the world precisely because human beings are too depraved to save themselves by reason or moral willpower. His revelation made it possible for human beings to be truly religious again. Mere reason never saved anyone from selfishness. Had the deists lacked any benefit of Christ's revelation, they would lack any serious claim to enlightenment. As it is, Butler warned, they were guilty of "unspeakable irreverence, and really the most presumptuous rashness. The whole analogy of nature shows that we are not to expect any benefits without making use of the appointed means for obtaining or enjoying them."²⁷

Butler eschewed the usual Enlightenment dichotomy between natural and special revelation. Revelation is essentially miraculous, he reasoned. Like Locke, he accepted the biblical picture of Jesus as a miracle-working Savior and did not feel compelled to provide naturalistic explanations for miracle stories. Butler stressed that the analogy of nature fits the Christian idea that God created and governs the world and will judge it in righteousness. This is what matters. No one knows enough to know that miracles are impossible by supernatural power. By definition, Butler argued, a miracle is relative to a course of nature and is different from the course of nature as understood. Butler did not say, as Hume famously said subsequently, that a miracle is a transgression of the laws of nature, since that wrongly presumed rational control of unknown things. Miracles might belong to a higher order of laws of nature.²⁸

Butler came closer than any theologian of his time to recovering the Anglican cord of Scripture, tradition, and reason, which was not close at all. The way of doubt and negation had carried too far, throwing Butler on the defensive. Essentially, he defended morality and its religious wellspring by naturalizing both as fundamental components of life. Nature is a moral system. Opposing morality is opposing nature itself, an absurdity. English theology, in its Enlightenment phase, leaned on this assurance that religious belief is reasonable and necessary. To understand religion, or to study it at a university, one began with natural theology, which made inferences about God's existence, attributes, and effects by studying the book of nature.

Analogy of Religion had no English-language rival in the eighteenth century until William Paley wrote renowned works that buttressed Butler's approach. Paley, a utilitarian moral philosopher, cleric, and abolitionist, published *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* in 1785, which scathingly condemned the slave trade as an atrocity and went through fifteen editions in twenty years. In his last years Paley wrote two landmark works of apologetics, *View of the Evidences of Christianity* (1794) and *Natural Theology* (1802), contending that God's existence is evident in the beauty, complexity, and order of creation and society, and the biblical miracles are reliable "evidences" on behalf of Christian

belief. Every graduate of Oxford and Cambridge in the nineteenth century was schooled in Butler and Paley, since both were prescribed for graduate exams.²⁹

The forerunners and founders of American liberal theology took for granted the preeminent standing of Butler's *Analogy* until the Kantian revolution challenged it. One solitary figure, Coleridge, brought to England the very unwelcome judgment that Kant far surpassed Locke and Butler. Coleridge's seminal *Biographia Literaria* (1817) contended that Kant exposed the superficiality of British empiricism and that post-Kantians like himself improved on Kant. In *Aids to Reflection* (1825), Coleridge took an aphoristic approach to the same argument, catching the admiring attention of New England intellectuals. Coleridge's American disciples founded a liberal theology movement that quoted Coleridge with enthusiasm and cast aside his Anglicanism. William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Theodore Parker were the bellwether figures. Channing said Locke did not understand what it means to be a spiritual being. Emerson and Parker, the icons of American transcendentalism, went further than Channing in casting aside Locke's philosophy and religion.³⁰

Transcendentalism was a US American variation of post-Kantian idealism. If Locke was aware only of his own ideas, how did he know that the universe is a vast machine? If green and sound depend on the existence of mind, how did Locke know that round or square, or solid or fluid, would still exist if mind disappeared? Those who knew a bit of Kant put it in Kantian fashion: If Locke ruled out a priori concepts, how was he so confident of his ability to deduce concepts of the understanding from experience? The transcendentalists said Locke and his successors wrongly esteemed an engineering concept of reason, which explained a great deal on its level, but not what really matters: the higher things of spirit, subjectivity, thought, and value.

German Liberal Theology: Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schleiermacher, G. W. F. Hegel, and the Ritschlian School

Kant is a towering figure in theology by virtue of being the only thinker who ranks with Plato and Aristotle in Western philosophy. He acquired this standing by making a historic attempt to fuse the rationalist and empiricist traditions, proffering original arguments about what it means to have a thought and to experience moral freedom: Reason and will are inseparable; reason is essentially an activity; free activity is reasonable; and freedom itself is the unfathomable groundless ground of something that we fathom, the moral law within us.

Kant framed an argument in which the history of Western philosophy led to him. Aristotle taught that objects acquire impetus and that four causes explain the "why" of everything: The *material* cause is the material out of which something is made and the subject of change; the *formal* cause is the shape of what a thing becomes; the *efficient* cause is the primary source of changing and resting; and the *final* cause is the end for which something exists. Newton destroyed metaphysical systems based on these arguments, contending that the universe is a closed system. Kant struggled for decades to prove that some kind of big-scale metaphysics was still possible—until he decided he had the wrong project. In *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant revolutionized philosophy

by redefining metaphysics as the science of the *limits* of reason, asking what can be known on an a priori basis apart from experience.³¹

He was indebted to the Enlightenment luminaries who preceded him: René Descartes, John Locke, G. W. Leibniz, Christian Wolff, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and David Hume. Descartes resolved to doubt nearly everything, conceiving epistemology as the philosophy of mind. Locke put epistemology at the center of philosophical inquiry, conceiving it as a map of the elements and associations of experience. Leibniz provided Kant's early rationalistic model of German Enlightenment metaphysics. Wolff was the German successor to Leibniz, revising his system and offering a personal model of German Enlightenment aspiration. Rousseau contended that the Enlightenment diminished human happiness and betrayed the cause of freedom by corrupting modern Europeans; the only cure was to cultivate public morality and civil society. Hume prodded Kant by arguing that there are no links between facts in the world of experience.³²

Kant distilled three terrible threats to enlightenment from these figures and his context: skepticism, determinism, and atheism. He aimed his *Critique of Pure Reason* and its sequels, *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) and *Critique of Judgment* (1790), at this triplet of threats, building up to a defense of religion as moral activity. Kant fused rationalist and empiricist ideas into a theory of the creative power of subjectivity, the primacy of practical reason, and the grounding of reason and morality in something lacking a comprehensible ground: freedom. *Critique of Pure Reason* described the metaphysical foundations of science and opened the door to post-Kantian departures; *Critique of Practical Reason* wrestled with moral truth, contending that human beings are free when they act according to reason; *Critique of Judgment* grappled with aesthetic judgment and the role of intellectual intuition in it.³³

Rationalists made substantive knowledge claims apart from experience, contending that we know nothing about the substances of things, or things-in-themselves, except through pure reason and logic. Empiricists taught that we know nothing about things-in-themselves except what we glean from our experience of them; all knowledge derives from sensation and reflection. Christian theology had Christianized Plato's doctrine of eternal forms by teaching that God the Father creates through the eternal Son of the Father, the mind of God, or Logos. Kant's theory of pure reason refashioned the Platonic forms as the pure forms of intuition (space and time), the divine Logos as the transcendental categories of understanding, and the Platonic flux of matter as the sensible manifold of intuition.

Kant did not want to be an idealist. He rejected Leibniz's Platonic idealism, Descartes's skeptical idealism, and George Berkeley's empirical idealism. But thinking about thinking drove Kant to some kind of idealism. He reasoned that the hard problem has to do with the a priori concepts of the understanding. Empirical representations are effects corresponding to the objects given to a subject; in mathematical concepts, the mind creates its objects in the act of knowing them. There is nothing in a mathematical object that is not in its concept. A priori concepts, however, are not the effects of objects given in experience, nor do they create their objects. So how do they correspond to objects? Kant described the forms of intuition and categories of understanding as a priori, thus universal. All knowledge has an a priori component that allows

rational subjects to make synthetic a priori judgments about the world, and all knowledge is synthetic. But synthetic a priori claims are not about reality *per se*. Rational subjects possessing certain a priori principles make claims about a “reality” they experience through these principles. Metaphysics is about the requisite conditions of experience, which Kant called transcendental.

He stopped the march of atheistic materialism in its tracks by showing that powers of mind consisting of transcendental categories of quantity, quality, relation, and modality are fundamental to human life. *Critique of Practical Reason* contended that the surpassingly important questions of meaning, value, purpose, morality, and religion belong to practical reason and are settled there. Kant reestablished metaphysical reason around two conceptual pivots: the ideality of space and time, and the idea of a knowable and yet supersensible freedom. Space is the pure form of outer sensibility, and time is the pure form of inner sensibility. The mind is active in producing experience through its transcendental categories, and freedom is the keystone to the vault of reason. The idea of freedom belongs to practical reason and is the basis of true morality. Pre-Kantian Enlightenment thinkers cast off narrative understandings of human purpose, throwing out Aristotelian ethics along with Aristotelian metaphysics. Thus, they lost the virtues too, as Kant feared. The Enlightenment was not producing morally improved human beings; it was more like the opposite. He sought to repair the deficit on Enlightenment terms, developing a theory of autonomous moral rulemaking.

Kant’s notoriously complex system was simple at its core since he was certain of only one thing: we ought to do right. If we ought to do right, there is one speculative idea that we know on an a priori basis: the idea of freedom. We do not understand this idea, yet we know it as the condition of the moral law, something we know. The actuality of the moral law makes room for the actuality of freedom that is necessary to grasp the moral law within us, which is simple, absolute, sublime, and discernible. Kant said we find it by universalizing the question of how any specific moral dilemma should be solved: What should everyone do in this situation? Doing the right thing, however, is very hard because we have to fight the radical evil within us, using all the good religion we can get. Kant based religion on morality because morality was what he cared about; according to him, religion lacks any claim to knowledge except by its connection to moral truth.³⁴

In the realm of faith, Kant argued, something needs to happen. Faith is personal and subjective, holding convictions that by their nature cannot be proved. Pure theoretical reason does not settle the question whether there is a God, a soul, or eternal life; the arguments on both sides are inconclusive. The idea of God belongs to practical reason as a condition for the possibility of the highest good, the ground of moral truth. We cannot pursue the good if we do not believe it is real and attainable. Kant said he could not imagine living with himself if he had no moral principles. Life has no meaning on these terms, and his passionate endeavors would have been pointless.

These arguments founded the original liberal theology movement in Germany. German Kantians identified liberal theology solely with their version of it. Liberal theology, they argued, accepts Kant’s verdicts about the right of individuals to their freedom, the limits of pure theoretical reason, the moral basis

of good religion, the importance of biblical criticism, and the role of religion in achieving a virtuous society. Religion must help us to be good and to create a good society. All other forms of religious doctrine and practice are odious, distracting from the struggle to conform our will to our moral duty.³⁵

Two iconic post-Kantian thinkers, Friedrich Schleiermacher and G. W. F. Hegel, founded rival theological schools in Germany that accepted most of Kant's system but rejected his doctrine of the unknowable thing-in-itself and his reduction of religion to morality. Schleiermacher said Kant did not understand religion, which is not fundamentally about moral duty. Religion is about feeling the whence, mystery, and infinity of one's life and the world. Religious people are drawn to worship out of feelings of awe, appreciation, sin, redemption, and relationship—deeper wellsprings than moral duty. True religion comes from spiritual feeling: an immediate relation to the source of life, a sense of the spirit of the whole. Feeling is a deeper aspect of human experience than reason or sensation. Schleiermacher rejected the rationalist denigration of feeling as a low form of knowledge and Kant's description of feeling as a third faculty alongside pure and practical reason. Feeling is not a form of knowing or a third faculty. It is self-consciousness as such, the unifying dimension of the self that prereflectively apprehends the world as a whole. Feeling is openness to the mystery of the whole and a sense of its infinite nature. Religion arises from a feeling of awe, appreciation, and mystery, not a moral imperative to grasp or control something.³⁶

In any moment we are aware of our unchanging identity *and* its changing character. Self-consciousness includes a self-caused element and a non-self-caused element that Schleiermacher called the Ego and the Other. The Ego expresses the subject for itself; the Other expresses the coexistence of the ego with an other. The self is an active subject *and* an object that is acted upon. This double movement of self-consciousness makes possible the feeling of being in relation with God, which Schleiermacher famously called the feeling of absolute dependence. We are thrown into a world we did not make. We exist as feeling, active creatures in coexistence with each other. The world is the totality of being, to which all judgments ultimately refer, and God is the idea of the unity of being, to which all concepts ultimately refer. Thus the idea of God is inherent in that of the world, but the two ideas are not the same. Both are transcendental terms, marking the limits of thought, and each is the terminus of the other. They meet at the common border of God and the world: the unity of God and the world in feeling.

Schleiermacher, Hegel, and philosopher Friedrich W. J. Schelling shared the post-Kantian project of fashioning Kant's patchy idea of intellectual intuition into systems of metaphysical idealism, but Schleiermacher claimed that his philosophy and theology were entirely separate; he did not theologize on a philosophical basis. Hegel argued that Kant and Schleiermacher trivialized religion by stripping it of cognizable metaphysical content. Speculative reason knows God as thought, it knows this thought as being and existence, and it knows existence as the negativity of itself, the simultaneously individual and universal self. History presses toward the revelation of beholding absolute being and finding itself in it.³⁷

Hegel began as a philosopher of Christian love and developed a philosophy of social subjectivity based upon it. He refashioned Kant's distinction between

understanding (*Verstand*) and reason (*Vernunft*) as the axis of his own system: Understanding is finite, sticks to fixed determinations, is based on the principle of noncontradiction, works on things given to it, and conceives the finite and infinite as mutually exclusive. Reason is infinite, apprehends the dialectical interplay of differences, works on materials that it gives itself, and apprehends the reciprocal interrelation of the finite and infinite. Every Hegel book turned on this distinction. His colossal *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) began with a straightforwardly Kantian project, asking how consciousness relates to objects, the relation of a self to an object. Then Hegel found himself thinking about the social relation of spirit to itself. His subject became a self-relation in relation to an object: a social, temporal, historical, self-transforming subject of experience and action. Christian love, it turned out, was more than the answer to a Kantian problem. It led Hegel to fashion his entire philosophical system out of Christian doctrines.³⁸

Hegel interpreted Christianity as a partial revelation and exemplification of the process by which Spirit is universalized in the understanding, not merely in religion. The life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit are moments in the dialectical process by which love divine saves what can be saved and inaugurates the universal life of Spirit. Spirit is a dialectical process beginning in pure thought (logic), moving into otherness and pictorial presentation (nature), and moving from nature into realized self-consciousness (Spirit knowing Spirit). Put differently, the first distinct moment of Spirit is Essence, God the Eternal. The second moment is Being-for-self for which the Essence is, God the Word. The third moment is Being-for-self in which the Spirit knows itself in the other, God as Spirit.

Many interpret Hegel as the theorist of a closed panlogical system; others claim that he only pretended to believe in God or metaphysics; others reduce him to phenomenology and/or social philosophy, whatever he may have otherwise believed; some interpret him as a proto-postmodern deconstructionist; and some, including me, interpret him as a Christian philosopher of love. Hegel was a religiously musical theorist of a new, fluid, intersubjective type of metaphysics, teaching that no (divine) love is exempt from (divine) anguish and that no reconciliation occurs without conflict and anguish. He interpreted Christianity as a picture story about the movement of self-certain Spirit abandoning its unity nature and unchangeableness to embrace the suffering of the world and return to itself. God suffering and dying on a cross is the abolition of the impassible pictured God, the deity of classical theism that did not suffer and was an exception to tragic anguish. The pictured God dies so that God as self-knowing Spirit may live. Christianity apprehends, in pictorial form, the process by which Spirit redeems the world by desiring, sundering, suffering, reconciling, and coming to know Spirit's self.³⁹

These three schools of thought yielded a profusion of "Mediating" theologies which variously fused Kant, Schleiermacher, and Hegel. Halle theologian Friedrich August G. Tholuck (1799–1877) expounded a pietistic Schleiermacher version of Mediating theology that transformed Halle's role in theological education and was a magnet for prospective theologians. Göttingen and Berlin theologian Isaac August Dorner (1809–84) was the preeminent Mediating theologian, fusing Hegel and Schleiermacher with a mild historicism that

he claimed unified the entire history of Christian theology. Two of Dorner's American disciples, Newman Smyth and Charles A. Briggs, grounded their "Progressive Orthodoxy" on this claim. All Mediating theologians had a liberalizing impulse that made them modern, though Schleiermacher did not call himself liberal or modern because Kantians owned liberal theology and Schleiermacher denied that he had any theology of his own. All he did was describe the Christian experience of redemption, while taking for granted that theologians had to recognize contradictions, faulty history, and outright myths in the Bible, as rationalist criticism had already done, and reconstruct religious belief by engaging modern disbelief. Thus he titled his landmark book of 1799 *Über die Religion: Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* (*On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*).⁴⁰

Rationalists had ransacked the Bible for unbelievable things, skewering Christian doctrines and, usually, the Hebrew foundations of Christianity, blasting Hebrew faith as tribal, provincial, and vindictive. In England they wrote in a slashing style that was long on accusation and ridicule. In Germany, rationalist critics proceeded gingerly, keeping sarcasm in check. German deist J. Lorenz Schmidt was a cautionary spectacle to them, having published a translation of the Pentateuch in 1735 with mildly rationalist commentary that got him arrested. Schmidt took asylum in Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, forced to live under assumed names. German deist Hermann Samuel Reimarus, teaching at Hamburg Academic Gymnasium, carefully protected his public reputation as a philologist while privately deconstructing the gospel story of Jesus. Reimarus wrote confidential letters to his friends that he fashioned into an unpublished book, *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes*. It argued that Jesus was a misguided political messiah lacking any idea of being divine. In 1774, six years after Reimarus died, his friend Gotthold Ephraim Lessing published excerpts of the book under the title *Wolfenbüttel Fragments*, still without naming Reimarus. These writings ignited a controversy in Germany that launched the quest of the historical Jesus as a scholarly enterprise. Johann Semler said the book frightened so many people that even politicians felt compelled to condemn it.⁴¹

Hegel and Schleiermacher sought to avoid conflicts with a broiling controversy over historical-Jesus criticism. Hegel got around it by renewing metaphysical reason. Schleiermacher, surrounded by cultured Romantic scoffers in Berlin, got around it by contending that doctrines and scriptural narratives are fallible attempts to express what happens in religious experience; probable judgments about historical events do not impinge on the truth of true religion. His apologetic was novel for refusing to seal any argument by citing Scripture, church tradition, or even a prominent religious thinker, except for his brief praise of a Jewish pantheist, Benedict de Spinoza. *On Religion* was historic on this account, offering a positive theology within the Christian church without appealing to external authorities of any kind.⁴²

Saying that liberal theology dispenses with external authority can be misleading. It does not mean that Scripture and tradition have no authority, or that liberal theology necessarily operates outside the sphere of the church. The Kantian school set a negative precedent on both counts, dispensing with scriptural authority and operating outside the Christian church and tradition. But it was possible on liberal terms to affirm a doctrine of scriptural authority and

to do so within the Christian church. Schleiermacher became the quintessential liberal theologian by grounding his theology in the Christian church, conceiving theology as interpretation of the church's experience of redemption. He did not say he revised the doctrine of religious authority, because that would have sounded like a throwback to the original problem. But Schleiermacher inspired Mediating theologies in which liberals invoked the authority of Scripture on liberal terms: Scriptural teaching is authoritative *within* Christian experience, not as an outside word that establishes or compels truth claims about particular matters of fact or doctrine.⁴³

Liberal theology was a sideshow in the home base of the mighty British Empire; it barely existed in anticlerical France; and German liberal theology was chauvinistic about European civilization, especially Prussian civilization, long before Germany had an empire or even a nation. Kant saw only gradations of backwardness and inferiority when his lecture courses peered beyond Europe. He taught a course on race that he might as well have titled *White Supremacy 101*. According to Kant, Europeans were at the top, Africans were at the bottom, everyone else sorted out in between, and Europeans soared so high they verged on becoming a separate race. Schleiermacher singled out England and especially France for criticism in 1799 because he didn't care about anyone else. What mattered was that Germany, not yet a nation, needed to catch up to England and France while preserving its spiritual and cultural superiority. Hegel, though caring very much about world history, contended that its axis was the Mediterranean Sea. He prattled to the end of his days that Africa was stuck in barbarism and Prussia represented the zenith of human achievement. North Africa interested Hegel only because the Phoenicians, Romans, Vandals, Byzantine Romans, Arabs, and Turks successively colonized it. Modern Europe was the land of spiritual unity, where the Spirit descended into itself, overcoming the so-called Middle Ages. Hegel prized Jerusalem because of Judaism and Christianity, and Mecca and Medina for Islam, but Greece was the light of history. Delphi, Athens, Rome, Carthage, Alexandria, and Constantinople loomed large in his imagination for enabling Europe to unite the particular and the universal.⁴⁴

America ranked at the low end on his telling since it had no history. Hegel gave short shrift to both American continents, though he conjectured that the burden of world history would reveal itself in America, perhaps in a contest between the two continents. In North America, he noted, the indigenous peoples were mostly destroyed and otherwise repressed. In South America and Mexico, the conquering violence was much worse, yet larger native populations survived. The Portuguese conquerors were more humane than the Dutch, Spanish, and English, but all were deadly violent and destructive, leaving North America to "the surplus population of Europe," while South America forged mixed-race republics based on military force. Hegel singled out the Creoles for evincing Hegelian self-awareness and autonomy, though of a low order. He thought the USA was better off than South America for being Protestant, industrious, and steeped in freedom consciousness, but he could not find an intellectual culture, and he believed its federalist government would not survive. It survived into the 1830s only because the USA was perched between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Sooner or later, Hegel said, the USA would discover that a large republic lacking a monarchy cannot defend itself from

foreign invaders. The USA was doubly vulnerable for relying so exclusively on commercial trading. It was hard to say what the USA would become, once it developed its vast unsettled territory: "What has taken place there up to now is but an echo of the Old World, and the expression of an alien life."⁴⁵

Liberal theology, in Germany, still had decades of heyday glory ahead when Hegel expounded on the backwardness of America. All three of the dominant German theological schools and the Mediating variations of them claimed to address the distinct challenges of modern historical consciousness, and all were inoculation strategies against doing so. Historicism is the idea that the key to the meaning and truth of any idea is its history. German theologians took historical criticism as far they thought it should go, as long as it did not override moral faith, or religious feeling, or metaphysical truth, or a Mediating blend of these commitments, all of which transcended mere historical probability. The Tübingen School of Ferdinand C. Baur developed a historicist approach to theology, but Baur's interpretations and theology were Hegelian, framed by a simplistic version of Hegel's dialectic. Albrecht Ritschl, a protégé of Baur, launched the fourth major school of German liberal theology in the 1870s by contending that Christian theology should be thoroughly historicist. Instead of inoculating theology against too much historical consciousness, theologians needed to embrace it, emphasizing that Christianity is irreducibly sociohistorical.⁴⁶

The Ritschlian School swept the field of theology in the 1880s by wedding historicism to a neo-Lutheran theology of faith and a burgeoning Prussian establishment. Ritschl cut his teeth on Baur's Hegelian historicism but decided it was too philosophical to qualify as true historicism. He absorbed the personal idealism and value theory of his Göttingen colleague, philosopher Rudolf Hermann Lotze, but denied that it controlled his theology. Ritschl said theology needed to privilege historical consciousness, reclaim the kingdom-oriented religion of Jesus, accept Kant's division of knowledge, and defend the indispensable role of religion in society. Everything has a history; the best way to understand anything is through its history. Christianity is essentially a kingdom movement based on the religion of Jesus, which can only be understood through faith. Science and religion are distinct fields of inquiry that should never conflict; science explains how things work in the physical world, and religion is about values. Christianity has an important role to play in undergirding the moral character of a good society. The Ritschlian School ruled the field of theology on the basis of these claims, albeit as Ritschlian theologians clashed with each other.⁴⁷

Wilhelm Herrmann challenged Ritschl to cast away all historical apologetics and metaphysical encumbrances. Adolf von Harnack acquired global fame as a church historian and theological leader, mostly upholding Ritschl's approach in both roles. Ernst Troeltsch began his distinguished career as a Ritschlian before judging that Ritschlian theology was too Christian to be historicist. Other Ritschlians won leading theological chairs in German universities: Johannes Gottschick, Theodore Häring, Julius Kaftan, Ferdinand Kattenbusch, Friedrich Loofs, Martin Rade, Max Reischle, Friedrich Traub, and Georg Wobbermin.⁴⁸

All grappled with Ritschl's historicism, judging that he took it too far (Herrmann), or got it approximately right (Harnack), or did not take it far enough (Troeltsch). All grappled similarly with Ritschl's attempt to expunge

metaphysics from theology, judging that he didn't go far enough (Herrmann), or got it right (Harnack), or was wrong to try (Troeltsch). Theologically, the Ritschlian School was based on an insider form of historicism, touting the autonomy of faith: since Christianity is fundamentally a kingdom movement with a distinct socioethical character founded on Christian faith alone, it is comprehensible only from within, not by outside onlookers. To many readers of Harnack's famous books, Ritschlian liberalism seemed commandingly self-confident, secure, and optimistic. But the clash between Herrmann and Troeltsch opened a chasm in the Ritschlian School. The two theologians pushed each other in opposite directions: Herrmann developed an existential fideism that rejected historical apologetics and metaphysics, while Troeltsch became the leading theologian of the history of religions approach, contending that true historicism cannot privilege a specific religion.⁴⁹

Ritschlian liberals, it turned out, profoundly disagreed about what historicism is good for and how far they should go in expunging metaphysics from theology. Their actual basis of unity was Culture Protestant nationalism, the civil religion of an expanding German Empire. Liberal theologians in Germany and England touted their standing in elite universities and defended their intellectual freedom. In both contexts they broadened the latter point by warning that churches would not survive if they compelled modern people to believe unbelievable things. In Germany, the elite factor was especially strong because theology itself had prestige-university status. German theologians were deeply concerned to uphold the academic standing of their field and to show the relevance of theology to society. The Ritschlian School was strong on both points, until suddenly it wasn't. Ritschlian liberal theology was practical, scholarly, and thoroughly bourgeois, comfortably ensconced in the churches, academy, and government, and avowedly comfortable with Germany's mighty growing army. It was so dominant in theology that when it crashed after World War I, liberal theology as a whole nearly perished in continental Europe. It went down with the humiliating destruction of Germany and loss of its colonies. Ever since, liberal theology has had this fateful history to overcome.

Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, the two leading theologians of the twentieth century, based their theological careers on their rejection of the Ritschlian liberalism in which they were trained. Barth said the corruption of modern theology began with Kant and Schleiermacher, not Ritschl. The entire liberal project was a terrible mistake, a betrayal of the Reformation faith of Martin Luther and John Calvin. Tillich said the problem of the Ritschlian School began with Ritschlians; renouncing the theological legacies of Kant, Schleiermacher, and Hegel was a nonstarter for him. Two very different theologies came from these disparate readings of the liberal tradition.

Inventing American Liberal Theology

The forerunners of American liberal theology were steeped in Locke, Clarke, and Butler; the founders were steeped in Locke, Clarke, Butler, Paley, Coleridge, and the scraps of Kant and Schleiermacher they knew. Charles Chauncy (1705–87) was the foremost forerunner. The great-grandson and namesake of an esteemed

Harvard president and Congregational cleric, Chauncy prized his rational freedom and his respected standing in the liberal wing of the Congregational Church, espousing a unitarian view of divine personality, a biblical doctrine of universal salvation, and an appalled opposition to evangelical revivalism. He and his New England Arminian friends paved the way to two generations of liberal Congregational clerics who saw no reason why they should mention the Trinity or accept the Unitarian label. Another small band of liberalizers, deriving mostly from Pietist and Anabaptist movements in Europe, founded Universalist congregations and societies in the mid-Atlantic colonies, teaching that God's atoning love saves all human souls. George de Benneville, a French-English immigrant in Pennsylvania, preached to German Brethren communities. John Murray, an English immigrant in Gloucester, Massachusetts, founded the first American Universalist congregation, in Gloucester in 1774. Hosea Ballou, a native of rural New Hampshire, swung the Calvinistic Universalists in the early 1800s to his liberal-unitarian theology, persuading them to adopt a theology better fitting their belief in an infinitely benevolent God. They retained one crucial aspect of their Calvinist background: the world is in God's hands.

In 1819, Channing said the Congregational liberals might as well embrace the Unitarian label since people were going to call them Unitarians anyway. As a teenager at Harvard, Channing recoiled at the spiritual inadequacy of Lockean empiricism. He went on to preach sublimely spiritual sermons as a liberal Congregational cleric and, later, a Unitarian cleric. Channing was a beacon to Emerson and Parker in the 1820s, when all three grappled for pulpit-usable new language that expressed their spiritual idealism. These three prophets of American Unitarianism were post-Kantian in idealizing their intuitions, which Emerson and Parker called transcendentalism, and outspokenly opposed slavery, especially Channing and Parker. American liberal theology began with them, with shimmering style and fateful negations, giving ballast to the conservative charge that liberal theology leads straight to Unitarianism or something worse, no religion at all.

The exodus of Unitarians from the Congregational churches left the remaining Congregationalists to battle with each other over how much Calvinism they should relinquish. Yale Divinity School was the epicenter of this debate from its founding in 1822 through the mid-nineteenth century. One of its graduates, Horace Bushnell, reignited the Congregational debate over liberal theology without putting it that way; being controversial came naturally to him. Bushnell wrote brilliantly creative theology that he laced it with his very American cluster of racist, anti-Semitic, antifeminist, and anti-Catholic bigotries. He was impossibly complex, like Thomas Jefferson, whom he disdained. Bushnell was willing to suffer for the antislavery cause, but he abhorred abolitionism. His literary sensibility freed him from reading the Bible through a dogmatic lens, though he shook with revulsion at what historical critics did to the Bible. He prized the Bible for its power to inspire, which Bushnell described with inspiring power of his own. He wrote stunningly beautiful works on religious language, moral atonement, and divine reconciliation. He also wrote a bestseller on the nurture of Christians that paraded his bigotries, oblivious that they ruined the book. Bushnell won followers who adopted his theological innovations,

others who embraced his emphasis on social and political issues, and some who said that progressive religion had to be both while shorn of his prejudices.

For most of the nineteenth century, the academy was off-limits to theological liberals; meanwhile, pastors outside the Unitarian fold could not employ biblical criticism or historicize Christian doctrines. Temporizers won the prestige pulpits while the elite Protestant seminaries taught slightly adjusted forms of Reformed orthodoxy, otherwise called New England Theology. Congregational cleric Henry Ward Beecher opened the floodgate to a gush of liberal pastors by achieving tremendous renown as a preacher of antislavery activism, romantic religious feeling, political reform, feminism, and healthy living. Theological doctrines, Beecher said, did not interest him. Replacing orthodoxy with a liberal theology would do little good. He was for the religion that produced the greatest number of vibrant and compassionate people. Beecher played a typically outsized role in the feminist movement, which intertwined with abolitionism and tragically broke apart over the racism of feminist icons Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. Feminism grew strong as a form of reform politics and religion, but only Cady Stanton anticipated feminist theology.

Liberal theology and the social gospel were not the same thing, except when they were. It was possible in the late nineteenth century to advocate liberal theology and not the social gospel, and vice versa. But the leaders of the two movements were the same people, and in the USA, the two movements mostly did blend together. For thirty years the social gospel was variously called applied Christianity, social Christianity, Christian socialism, or the social gospel, until the latter name won out. There was a White church tradition of it that emphasized economic justice and political reform, usually assigning third or fourth place to what it called "race relations." Congregational minister Washington Gladden and Baptist academic Walter Rauschenbusch were its lodestars, both taking for granted that liberal theology and the social gospel rightly folded together. There was a Black church tradition that had no choice concerning its priorities, since the Black social gospel arose precisely to counter America's racial caste system and its mania of racist terror, conceiving a new abolitionism. African Methodist Episcopal clerics Reverdy Ransom and Richard R. Wright Jr. enlisted Black churches in political struggles for racial justice while taking for granted, like Gladden and Rauschenbusch, that liberal theology and the social gospel should fold together.

The social gospel was booming in the 1890s when academics belatedly entered the liberal theology movement, usually through the social gospel. Economist Richard Ely and social ethicists Francis Greenwood Peabody, Graham Taylor, and William Jewett Tucker founded the field of social ethics in the 1880s, carving out a theological discipline that studied social problems and reform movements. These social gospel founders of social ethics made the first incursion of theological liberals into the elite seminaries and divinity schools, paving the way for the theologians, Bible scholars, religious educationists, and religious philosophers who followed. US American liberal theology differed from its German and British counterparts in coming late to biblical criticism and the systematic reinterpretation of Christian doctrine. It had no academic theologians until the 1890s, when they came in a rush.

Modernist Liberalisms: Enlightenment and Evangelical

Historically, American liberal theology is the child of two heritages. From its Enlightenment heritage it upheld the authority of modern knowledge, emphasized the continuity between reason and revelation, and championed the values of tolerance, humanistic individualism, and democracy. From its evangelical heritage it affirmed the authority of Christian experience, upheld the divinity and sovereignty of Christ, and preached the need of personal salvation and the importance of Christian missions. Both streams of thought generally distrusted metaphysical reason, though important dissenters on both sides said it was disastrous for Christian theology to disparage metaphysics. This twin heritage undergirds the historic distinction in American liberal theology between its evangelical and modernist streams, including generations of debate about the viability of fusing these two traditions. The evangelical-modernist distinction was unfortunately named and was often rendered wrongly as an either-or binary. But it marked something too important and divisive not to name, being fractiously debated for decades.

The nineteenth century had almost run out before American liberal theology had a theological textbook, William Newton Clarke's *An Outline of Christian Theology* (1898). It was winsomely written and deeply biblical, reflecting that Clarke was a conservative Bible scholar and pastor before he became a liberal evangelical professor at Colgate University in Hamilton, New York. Taking the theology chair at Colgate compelled Clarke to write his own textbook since nothing suitable existed. Meanwhile he befriended young theologian William Adams Brown, recently trained by Harnack at Berlin, who confronted at Union Theological Seminary in New York City the same pedagogical situation as Clarke. Brown had Clarke's manuscript as a model when he wrote his own textbook, *Christian Theology in Outline* (1906). It had essentially the same evangelical liberal perspective as Clarke, but Brown was steeped in Ritschl and Harnack, not Bible scholarship, and he lacked Clarke's literary flair. These two books dominated the American theology textbook market for forty years. They introduced the classic doctrines of systematic theology to generations of mainline Protestant seminarians, in a mildly liberal and irenic style, assuring readers that modern theology retained the Christ of gospel faith.⁵⁰

Three schools emerged in the early twentieth century as the leaders of the liberal theology movement: Union Theological Seminary, Boston University School of Theology, and the University of Chicago Divinity School. Union was ecumenical Protestant, formerly Presbyterian, and defined theologically by two recent Harnack protégés, Brown and Arthur C. McGiffert. Boston was Methodist and steeped in the same evangelical liberalism as Union, but distinguished by its personalist version of post-Kantian idealism propounded by philosopher Borden Parker Bowne. Chicago was Northern Baptist and committed to ultra-modernism, pragmatism, naturalism, and radical empiricism, as developed by theologians Shailer Mathews, George Burman Foster, and Gerald Birney Smith.

Some liberal theologies rested entirely on appeals to the person and teaching of Jesus, and some were strongly rationalist and secularizing. The mainstream of liberal theology, however, was gospel-centered and explicitly fusionist,

emphasizing normative claims about Jesus, calling itself liberal evangelical, and also calling itself modernist, believing itself to be fully modern. Every form of liberal theology discarded traditional beliefs that were deemed to be unbelievable or harmful. In the Progressive Era, Darwinian theory was the number one challenge to traditional belief. Evangelical liberals walked a tightrope on this issue, accepting Darwinian biology, rejecting social Darwinism, and puzzling over the line separating biology from the moral teachings of Jesus and Christianity. They said historical criticism should not be feared because it yields the social gospel Jesus.

The Chicago School countered that evangelical liberals did not qualify as modernists because no theology is fully modern if it treats norms of the past as authoritative. On this view, the rupture between premodern and modern forms of theological consciousness was defining, fundamental, and lasting, not something papered over by appeals to development. The Chicago School reserved to itself the right of the modernist name: the only way to modernize theology is to make it as scientific as chemistry, or at least, sociology. All religions are constructions reflecting the social, historical, and intellectual circumstances of their origin and transmission. The Chicago theologians stripped away the transcendental givens of German idealism and the liberal evangelical claim that historical criticism confirms the Christ of faith. They supported the social gospel because it underwrote modern democracy and Christian idealism, not because the historical Jesus authorized it. To them, the social gospel was plainly modern, to its credit.

Every ism in this debate—liberalism, modernism, evangelicalism, empiricism, naturalism, Darwinism, pragmatism, and historicism—has a complex history of shifting meanings that were themselves causes of contention. Some liberals preferred to be called modernist on the ground that liberalism is an individualistic and political flag-word with too much Unitarian history. “Modernist” was unifying by comparison, and sometimes said to be more church-friendly, extending to the Roman Catholic modernist movements that briefly stirred in England, France, and the USA. From 1891 till 1906, Irish Jesuit priest George Tyrrell contended that the Roman Church wrongly set itself against science, which got him expelled from the Jesuit order. French theologian and priest Alfred Loisy, during the same period, made a scholarly case for Catholic modernism, urging the church to embrace modern historical consciousness instead of condemning it. The best way to defend the church against Harnack’s criticism was to say that the church developed as it should, in ways that Jesus and his disciples could not have imagined. The Vatican replied by mining Loisy’s books for condemnable errors, drawing much of its historic Syllabus of Errors (1907) from his work. Then in 1908 the Vatican excommunicated Loisy, extinguishing the hope for a theologically progressive French Catholicism.⁵¹

Tyrrell and Loisy had American counterparts who tried to create an American Catholic modernism and were similarly silenced or expelled. University of Notre Dame chemistry professor and Holy Cross priest John A. Zahm, Paulist priest William L. Sullivan, and a handful of Sulpician priests at St. Joseph’s Seminary in Yonkers (Dunwoodie), New York, led by seminary president James Francis Driscoll and biblical scholar Francis E. C. Gigot were the bellwether figures. They imagined a Roman Catholic Church that used modern methods

and a mildly reformist spirit to defend the church's teaching, in Loisy's fashion. A series of papal condemnations canceled this venture. In *Testem Benevolentiae* (1899), Pope Leo XIII censured Americanism by name. In *Lamentabili Sane* (1907), Pius X condemned the historical-critical approach to Scripture and sixty-four related modernist ideas. In *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (1907), Pius X described modernism as the synthesis of all heresies. In 1910, the Vatican instituted an antimodernist oath for all Catholic clergy and theology professors.⁵²

The Vatican crushed Catholic modernism, forestalling Catholic forms of liberal theology until Vatican Council II (1962–65). Some American theological liberals, especially Congregational theologian Newman Smyth and Episcopalian biblical scholar Charles Briggs, were distraught over the fate of Catholic modernism. For others it confirmed an assumed belief that Catholicism was hopelessly authoritarian. Meanwhile the differences between evangelical liberals and ultramodernist liberals hardened. Evangelical liberals made normative claims about the divinity and ethical religion of Jesus, conceiving divine reality as in some way transcendent to the physical world. Ultramodernist liberals spurned any appeal to normative claims of the past, conceiving divine reality as a factor in the world process or as otherwise wholly immanent in it.

The differences between these rival tendencies were debated long before each side settled on its names. In 1906, Foster's landmark book *The Finality of the Christian Religion* called for a thoroughly modern alternative to the halfway empiricism and too-Christian historicism of the Ritschlian School. In 1910, Gerald Birney Smith contended that the Ritschlian liberalism of his teacher, Brown, fell short of being modern because it appealed to religious norms of the past. In 1926, personal-idealist theologian Daniel Sommer Robinson contended in *The God of the Liberal Christian* that liberal theology was fundamentally divided between Ritschlian "New Theists" and post-Ritschlian "Social Theologians." The New Theists employed a personal-idealistic metaphysic to undergird their belief in a cosmic-personal God, while the Social Theologians were pragmatic naturalists who conceived God as a symbol of humanity's highest ideals.⁵³

Robinson described a familiar divide with new names that did not work, since the Ritschlians were social theologians and the Chicago modernists might as well have been called "new theists." Moreover, he fixed entirely on the God question. However, sixty years after Robinson's book, theologian William Dean made the same argument about the state of liberal theology, with no awareness that Robinson preceded him. In *American Religious Empiricism* (1986), Dean contended that liberal theology was fundamentally divided between those who appealed to a transhistorical realm of spirit and those who conceived God as the concrete reality of historical process. He called the first group "pietistic liberals" and the second group "empirical liberals," siding with the latter. But there were pietists and empiricists in both camps, and neither side owned the term "modernist," so I employ a term that avoids these problems and names the second camp "ultramodernist."⁵⁴

The first American liberal Protestant to embrace the name "modernist," Newman Smyth, did so in 1908 to declare his solidarity with besieged Catholic modernists. On the other hand, Mathews argued for most of his career that the best kind of modernism was evangelical, needing the language and spirit of personal religion, but not liberal, which smacked of Unitarian negativity to

him. On that ground he tried to persuade liberal Protestants to call themselves modernists, unsuccessfully; Mathews did not bow to the prevailing usage until the 1930s, by which time he had dropped the evangelical aspects of his theology anyway. The Chicago School gradually discarded its evangelical vestiges, opting wholly for the social scientific language of process, growth, idealism, immanence, patterns, emergence, and value.⁵⁵

Both sides of this argument were fully liberal by the six-plank definition, and both added the American social gospel plank to it. It is possible to exaggerate the conflicts between these perspectives; theologians Kenneth C. Cauthen and Lloyd Averill, for example, deployed this distinction as an either-or binary. But discarding the distinction altogether is more misleading. Religious historian William Hutchison and theologian Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, in their otherwise astute analyses of American theological liberalism, overreacted to Cauthen and decades of debate by throwing out the evangelical-modernist distinction on the ground that all liberals were modernists. Certainly, all liberals were modernists, but ultramodernists insisted otherwise, and leading evangelical liberals such as McGiffert, Henry Sloane Coffin, and Henry Pitney Van Dusen—heading Union Seminary as presidents from 1917 to 1963—were adamant that “evangelical” was a banner word too precious to give up, even as Protestant conservatives came to own the term.⁵⁶

Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Liberation Theology

Two framing issues remain to be delineated before our subject is fully in view: How do the legacies of Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and American neo-orthodoxy relate to liberal theology? And how does liberal theology relate to liberation theology and postmodernity?

From 1925 to 1965 the dialectical theologies of the so-called neo-orthodox revolt against liberalism ruled the field of Protestant theology in Europe and North America. Swiss theologians Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, German theologians Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann, and American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr shared a vehement rejection of theological liberalism and a professed desire to retrieve select tropes of the Protestant Reformation. Liberal theology, they said, replaced the evangelical faith of Luther and Calvin with an idealistic ideology of progress geared to win the respect of a secularizing scientific culture. It vested too much faith in human reason and middle-class idealism, both of which were shredded by World War I. Barth issued his epochal attack against liberal theology in the wake of the war, launching a movement first called “crisis theology” and “dialectical theology.” A dozen years later a similar upending occurred in the USA, where Niebuhr had the Barth role.

Barth and Niebuhr preached liberal theology in their early careers before turning against it with polemical fire. Both condemned it as a counterfeit gospel of capitulation to modernity. It would be hard to exaggerate the force of this verdict in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Famous theologians condemned liberal theology as humanistic idealism, claiming to restore the authority of the Bible and to recover Reformation principles that liberalism discarded. Barth was by far the leading proponent of this theological turn,

insisting that Scripture alone is the rule of faith and theology is the explication of the revealed Word. But a great deal of so-called neo-orthodoxy was in fact liberal theologizing dressed up with orthodox language and polemical exaggeration. Even Barth did not contend that biblical history is accurate or that liberal scholars were wrong to deconstruct it.⁵⁷

American neo-orthodoxy was a boast about being more biblical, orthodox, and realistic than liberal theology. Niebuhr ridiculed liberal idealism, rationalism, sentimentality, and pacifism with devastating brilliance, taking American theology and social ethics in his direction. Yet Niebuhr took for granted the authority of reason and experience in theology, judging that Barth's *sola scriptura* approach was impossibly reactionary. Niebuhr's governing assumptions were liberal, even as he skewered idealistic and rationalistic versions of liberalism. Tillich, who fled to the USA in 1933, was happy to dismiss liberal theology as a mistake of the Ritschlian School. But Tillich won spectacular fame in the USA by applying German idealism, Marxism, and existentialism to the post-World War II cultural context. His enormously influential system was a species of liberal theology in the broad sense that Tillich shared with Kant, Schleiermacher, Hegel, and Schelling. The preeminence of Niebuhr and Tillich in American theology was widely interpreted as the death knell of liberal theology, since they said harsh things about it. They fashioned theologies that skewered the idealistic and moralistic aspects of the liberalism of the past generation. But Niebuhr and Tillich were liberals on all six planks that define the liberal tradition. They fashioned important new forms of liberal theology that construed myth as the natural language of religion and appropriated the Marxist critique of rationalism and idealism.

The last issue needing a frame is the question of what counts as liberal theology in the age of liberation theologies that privilege race, gender, sexuality, class, and multiple intersections of these categories. Liberation theology was, and is, the third major perspective in US American theology since the nineteenth century to reshape the field of theology as a whole. Liberals set the agenda of modern theology, rendering "liberal" and "modern" as interchangeable terms. The neo-Reformation revolt broke the liberal domination of modern theology, fashioning modern theologies emphasizing dialectic, paradox, irony, transcendence, and political realism. Three original forms of liberation theology emerged in the 1970s, all demanding liberation from dependency and oppression. Black liberation theology in the USA began as a declaration of solidarity with the Black Power movement. Latin American liberation theology focused mostly on economic oppression and the ravages of imperialism. Feminist liberation theology treated gender as a fundamental category of analysis, requiring wholesale reinterpretations of Christian doctrine. In all three cases, liberation theology was a declaration of independence from prevailing theological traditions and a condemnation of the role of Christian theology in perpetuating oppression.

Liberation theologians brushed aside the fixation of modern theologians with making Christianity credible to privileged skeptics. Liberation theology and the postmodern cultural context in which liberation theologies multiplied vastly complicated the question of what remains of the liberal approach to theology. US American liberal theology did not cease to refashion itself after neo-orthodoxy crashed, liberation theology arose, modernity gave way

to postmodern fragmentation, interfaith theology made a comeback, and the religious-studies approach to religion marginalized theology as an academic discipline. It was more like the opposite: US American liberal theology experienced a hidden renaissance in the closing decades of the twentieth century, despite its immense challenges, yet also because of them.

The last generation of theologians trained under the reigns of Protestant neo-orthodoxy and Catholic neo-Thomism had to retool in the 1970s. Protestant theologians Edward Farley, Langdon Gilkey, Peter Hodgson, Gordon Kaufman, and Sallie McFague joined the liberal tradition they were taught to disparage. Roman Catholic theologians Gregory Baum, Roger Haight, Elizabeth Johnson, Paul Knitter, Rosemary Ruether, and David Tracy developed new progressive theologies after Vatican II. Meanwhile, John B. Cobb Jr., David Ray Griffin, Marjorie Suchocki, Catherine Keller, and Monica A. Coleman built up the school of process theology based on the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. Whiteheadian process thought became the most vital school of US American liberal theology by emphasizing its relational, interreligious, feminist, and ecological worldview.

Every theologian just named responded to liberationist criticism and the postmodern turn of academic theology. Liberal theologians have never merely transmitted a tradition. "Liberal" and "progressive," two terms employed interchangeably for much of their history, also have up-and-down histories of being the favored term: "liberal" for its connection to freedom and "progressive" for evoking progress. In American politics, "progressive" won out by default after liberal Democrats escalated the war in Vietnam and a resurgent political Right pilloried "liberal" as a scare word. "Progressive," however, has the disadvantage of naming something that almost no one believes, that history is progressive. One plausible tack is to confine liberal theology to a past era, employing progressive, revisionist, or constructive as a substitute name. But nothing passes from one generation to the next unchanged. The liberal approach to theology, by whatever name, is still being refashioned more than two hundred years after full-fledged liberal theologies existed in Britain, Germany, and the USA.

2. Transcendental Intuitions and Abolitionist Disruptions

Liberal theology was first imagined in colonial New England by rationalistic Congregational clerics with a unitarian bent and in the mid-Atlantic colonies by pietistic Baptists who believed in universal salvation. It arose in the USA by acknowledging its Unitarianism, or Universalism, or both, touting its post-Kantian Romantic intuitions, and sometimes crossing the line into abolitionist disruption. Liberal Christians recoiled at the regnant Calvinist orthodoxy of the Standing Order Congregational churches and the Presbyterian, Reformed, and Baptist churches. It could not be that a benevolent God predestined most human beings to eternal damnation and that no person has free will. The earliest liberalizing impulse was to alleviate Calvinism of its harshest doctrines. Then liberal theologians cast aside authority religion itself.

Two groups paved the way to American liberal theology: Liberal Congregationalist clerics in New England with a connection to Harvard, and Baptist Universalists in the mid-Atlantic colonies and Rhode Island. George de Benneville was the first American Universalist. In 1741 he emigrated from England to the Oley Valley area in Pennsylvania, where he preached a mystical gospel to German Brethren communities, the pacifist Dunkers. John Murray emigrated from England in 1770, establishing the first American Universalist congregation four years later in Gloucester, Massachusetts. In England he had converted from Methodism to the independent Universalism of Welsh evangelist James Rely. In Massachusetts, Murray contended that believing in the salvation of all people was a sufficient basis to break from existing denominations. By 1785 enough Universalist societies and congregations existed to hold a general convention in Oxford, Massachusetts.¹

The Universalists never had a corner on the one thing that defined them, and they were a trickle compared to the Congregationalists who became Unitarians. In 1805 the second historic leader of the Universalists, Hosea Ballou, denied that Universalism was a sufficient basis for the denomination. A self-educated rural preacher and reader of Unitarian and deist fare, Ballou said it was not enough for the Universalist Church to strip Calvinism of its worst plank, predestination to eternal damnation. Universalists also needed to discard the Trinity, orthodox Christology, and substitutionary atonement. This contention put Ballou in closer affinity with liberal Congregationalists of the early nineteenth century than with many of his fellow Universalists, until he swung much of his denomination in his direction. The liberal wing of the Universalist Church, led by Ballou, and the Unitarian Fellowship that broke from the Congregational Church, led by William Ellery Channing, made a hyper-Protestant argument,

claiming to recover the original Christian faith that was mutilated by a dogmatizing church. The Unitarians made a greater impact than the Universalists because they had high standing before and after they became Unitarians.²

Congregational pastors Charles Chauncy (1705–87), Jonathan Mayhew (1720–66), and Ebenezer Gay (1696–1787) were the leading forerunners of American Unitarianism. They combined supernaturalism and rationalism, keeping New England religion in step with the English Enlightenment. They conferred a Christian blessing on Isaac Newton's orderly world picture, prizing the capacity of reason to decipher the divine book of nature. They were also non-Trinitarian Christian theists like the English philosophers they most admired, John Locke and Samuel Clarke. If Locke and Clarke counted as good Anglicans, they reasoned, surely it was legitimate for Congregationalists to leave aside the unfortunate Nicene Trinity.

Chauncy was a great-grandson and namesake of Harvard's second president, and a longtime pastor of First Church, Boston. Mayhew was Chauncy's friend and clerical colleague at West Church, Boston. Gay was a pastor in Hingham, Massachusetts, and Mayhew's former teacher. With revulsion they endured the Great Awakening of 1730–70. British evangelist George Whitefield and New England pastor-theologian Jonathan Edwards called American colonialists to confess their total depravity, asking for God's mercy. The New England Arminians countered that revivalism ran on fear-mongering denigration. They shared with Edwards the New England Calvinist conviction that revelation and reason go together, but to the Arminians, revival religion was an affront to revelation, reason, and the good.³

Chauncy had the social standing to defy a burgeoning evangelical enthusiasm, though he played a careful hand with his book on universal salvation, publishing it anonymously. He allowed that Edwards had a prodigious intellect and that Whitefield was a spellbinder who made people want to do nothing but listen to sermons. Edwards, high-born as the grandson of legendary Congregational minister Solomon Stoddard, agreed with Chauncy that uneducated revivalists should be barred from preaching. But Edwards and the riveting Whitefield led to Awakening preachers like Gilbert Tennent, who imitated them badly, spewing invective and threats of hellfire. Chauncy was appalled, observing that Tennent harangued his listeners "with a Spirit more bitter and uncharitable than you can easily imagine; all were *Pharisees, Hypocrites, carnal unregenerate Wretches*, both Ministers and People, who did not think just as he did, particularly as to the Doctrines of *Calvinism*; and those who opposed him, and the Word of God he was sure he was carrying on, would have opposed *Christ Jesus himself* and *his Apostles*, had they lived in their day."⁴

Chauncy said it was terribly important to believe that human beings possess natural powers to attain an actual likeness to God in knowledge and holiness. Total depravity is a travesty of biblical religion. God wants us to use our God-given reason and free will to become enlightened and virtuous. He said it plainly while laboring secretly on his masterwork, *The Mystery Hid from Ages and Generations* (1784). There, Chauncy compiled nearly four hundred pages of biblical support for the view that God wills and achieves the salvation of all human souls. The book was scholarly, detailed, vigorously written, and historic. Chauncy believed that Universalism needed better advocates than Murray,

whose emotional evangelism smacked too much of Rely and Whitefield. The ideal was to gather all the scriptural data in a rational fashion, emphasize God's infinite benevolence and loving will, and preserve a measure of human free will. Since Scripture amply attests that God is all-powerful and wants all people to attain virtue, it cannot be that God sends any soul to eternal punishment. Chauncy said God is unstoppably devoted to the reformation of souls: "God has so loved us as to project a scheme, which in the final result of its prosecution, will inflate us *all in heavenly and immortal glory.*" He reasoned that the scriptural references to hell refer to a cleansing purgatory after death for those who do not attain virtue in this life, not to a state of everlasting torment. It probably takes longer for God to reform the really hardened sinners into a state of holiness.⁵

Chauncy and Mayhew roared for their God-given right to intellectual freedom. Claiming that God holds any individual responsible for the sins of another person is an offense against morality and the goodness of God. Reason, they insisted, does not undermine the authority of biblical revelation. The opposite is the case; no dogma is more effective than individual reason in preserving the authority of the Bible. Reason deciphers what God has revealed in the Bible and nature. Chauncy and Mayhew epitomized the liberal Congregationalism that leaned unitarian and professed to hold together revelation and reason. God is the eternal Creator, and Jesus was the subordinate Son of God who pointed the way to the Father. The liberal Congregationalists prized their elite status and good manners, adopted unitarian views, and demanded not to be called Unitarians—a name smacking to them of English Unitarianism, brittle contrarianism, political radicalism, impiety, and bad manners.⁶

Unitarianism, the belief that God is only one person, arose as a religious movement in the late 1550s in the Polish Calvinist village of Secemin, where Italian theologian Faustus Socinus (Fausto Sozzini) contended that anti-Trinitarians like himself should not be expelled from the general synod of the Polish Reformed Church. The Socinians, as they were called, officially lost the argument in 1565 and were ordered to convert to Roman Catholicism or leave Poland. Many took refuge in Transylvania or Holland, where they adopted the name Unitarian. The Unitarian idea and name seeped into England respectively in the 1660s and 1670s. For a century it grew alongside other Dissenting communities in English cities, touting its Enlightenment rationality, and providing a religious home for deists.

In 1774, Theophilus Lindsey and Joseph Priestley established England's first avowedly Unitarian congregation, Essex Street Church in London. Lindsey was an Anglican priest supported by aristocratic patronage who studied Unitarian criticism in the 1760s and befriended Priestley in 1769. Priestley was a high-powered English chemist, materialist philosopher, Unitarian theologian, and radical liberal who discovered oxygen the same year that he and Lindsey founded Essex Street Church. Priestley assailed Trinitarian doctrine and demanded toleration and equal rights for religious Dissenters. In the 1780s he was a leading Dissenter, preaching every Sunday to his Unitarian congregation in Birmingham. In 1791 he was driven out of England for praising the French Revolution. A mob burned down Priestley's home and church in Birmingham, and he fled to Northumberland County, Pennsylvania, where his son was a woodland developer. Priestley tried to live quietly in rural Pennsylvania and

resume his scientific investigations. But his radical views and friendship with Thomas Jefferson made him a lightning rod of controversy. His sermonizing yielded the USA's first full-fledged Unitarian congregation, First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia, in 1796. To the privileged New England liberals who eventually split the Congregational Church, Priestley was a problematic forefather. He was too eminent and accomplished to ignore, but not their kind of Unitarian. King's Chapel in Boston fit them better; it was abandoned by its Anglican Loyalist constituency during the American Revolution and reconstituted by James Freeman in 1785 as a hybrid Anglican-Unitarian congregation. The unitarian Congregationalists resisted the Unitarian name until Channing persuaded them to infuse it with proper Christian piety.⁷

The year 1805 was a watershed for the liberal Congregationalists. Harvard College's Hollis Professor of Divinity, David Tappan, died in 1803. Conservatives controlled only one of Boston's nine Congregational churches; meanwhile, Tappan's death threatened a delicate balance of conservatives and liberals on the Harvard faculty. A bitter fight for control of the college raged for two years. In 1805, liberal scholar Henry Ware Sr. was named to the Hollis chair, and conservatives despaired that they had lost Harvard too. The appointment of a liberal, Samuel Webber, to the Harvard presidency in 1808 sealed their defeat. That year the conservatives retreated to Andover, Massachusetts, to establish their own school, Andover Theological Seminary, pledging to defend a battered Calvinist orthodoxy—and to expose their liberal opponents as Unitarian semi-Christians, not fellow Congregational Christians. Channing became the unlikely leader of the accused Unitarian Christians.

William Ellery Channing and the Divine Likeness

Born in 1780 in Newport, Rhode Island, Channing was the third of nine children, a child of the American Revolution and its contradictions. His father, William Channing, was a Princeton-educated lawyer who served as district attorney of Newport and state attorney general of Rhode Island. His mother, Lucy Ellery Channing, was a daughter of William Ellery, a member of Congress and signer of the Declaration of Independence. Both of Channing's parents were emotionally distant from him, withholding the affection he craved. He grew up on Calvinist preaching in a commercial seaport town devastated by the Revolutionary War, spending long days at the beach, cultivating a mystical spirituality that marked him as a loner for the rest of his life. At the beach, Channing avoided George Washington and other Federalist dignitaries who traipsed through his home, as well as Newport's traffic of sailors, sex workers, retired sea captains, French and British army officers, rum merchants, slave traders, and enslaved human beings of African descent.

Channing knew one fiercely abolitionist minister, theologian Samuel Hopkins, pastor of Newport's First Congregational Church. Hopkins was the foremost New Light Calvinist theologian of his generation, teaching that Jesus died for all sinners, not merely for the elect; and that all people stand before God on account of their own sin, not the imputation of Adam's sin. He condemned slavery from the pulpit and raised money to free numerous enslaved persons.

Hopkins was severe, otherworldly, remote, disheveled, intellectual, a drawling speaker, and a preacher of hellfire sermons, all of which made his abolitionism easier to dismiss as one of his eccentricities. He was too strange and ostracized to be a role model to Channing. But Channing worried about his moral and spiritual character from an early age, and he recognized that Hopkins had rare moral courage. Channing grew up intimately acquainted with America's coupling of liberty consciousness and racist oppression. His parents were moralistic Federalists who owned enslaved servants before the Revolutionary War and did not say, afterward, whether they believed slavery was justifiable. They said nothing about slavery while Newport lived off the slave trade and rum.⁸

Newport repelled Channing, and religion offered little help to him, though he respected Newport pastor Ezra Stiles, later a Yale president. The quintessential Channing story about his religious upbringing was about a revival. On one occasion his father surprised Channing by spending some time with him, taking him to a revival. The evangelist waxed long and fearsomely on the horrors of hell. Most people were headed to the endless torment of hell, and only Jesus could save them from it. Channing felt the terror of his condemned condition and a twinge of skepticism about the performance. Was the sermon true? He looked to his father, who said the evangelist preached sound doctrine. But on the way home, his father whistled incongruously, and at home there were no words about fleeing the wrath to come. Instead, William Channing calmly read a newspaper, propping his feet before the fireplace. Channing realized that his father didn't believe it. At first, he felt relieved; then he felt violated. If people believed it, why did they say that God is good and loving? If people like his father didn't believe it, why did they pretend otherwise? As Channing told the story, this experience was formative for him, notwithstanding that in his early ministerial career, he preached hellfire sermons too.⁹

At the age of twelve he was dispatched to the tutelage of his uncle Henry Channing, a liberal Congregationalist pastor in New London, Connecticut, who prepared Channing for Harvard. William Channing died unexpectedly, and in 1794, at the age of fourteen, Channing enrolled at Harvard. It was a dismal time to be there. Harvard had four professors, three tutors, and 173 students. The faculty was elderly, repelled by the French Revolution, and appalled at an upsurge of atheism and bad manners in American society, which it blamed on the French Revolution. Harvard taught students to revere loyalty, tradition, antiquity, John Locke, and reasonable religion, in the Harvard fashion. Tom Paine's deist manifesto, *Age of Reason*, so alarmed Harvard that the school issued a copy of Bishop Richard Watson's rejoinder, *Apology for the Bible*, to every student. Channing caught that his teachers were defensive and demoralized. He sympathized with them but resisted what they tried to teach him, especially about Locke. Channing recoiled at Locke's contention that all ideas are products of sensory experience or reflection on experience. He had a sense of his spiritual nature that Locke said nothing about. It didn't matter that Locke believed in God and defended religion; religion itself was missing in his religion. There had to be a better philosophy than Locke's, something more in line with the mystical sensibility that Channing cultivated as a lonely beach walker.¹⁰

Channing found relief from Locke and David Hume in Irish-Scot moral philosopher Francis Hutcheson (1694–1747), the first Enlightenment thinker

to condemn the entire slave system, who taught that all individuals have an innate proclivity for altruism that is known through feeling, not reason. He moved on to Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid (1710–96) and Welsh moral philosopher Richard Price (1723–91), who said Hutcheson was too subjective; the moral ideas of right and wrong are inherent in the very process of reasoning. Reid taught that self-consciousness contains principles of substance, extension, mass, and noncontradiction that are prior to and independent of experience. He never developed a system but described these principles as the God-given common sense of humankind. To deny any of them, he said, “is what we call *absurd*.” In 1758 Price sketched a precursor form of rational intuitionist moral theory, reasoning that moral qualities are fundamental synthetic truths that assert objective facts. Moral truths belong to the same plane as substance and extension, existing not merely in the mind of the perceiver. Price pioneered the distinction between reason and understanding that undergirded every version of transcendental philosophy, conceiving reason as calculating and empirical, lacking the capacity of understanding to create new ideas.¹¹

Channing had Price in his head for the rest of his life, spelling Love and Right and Liberty with capital letters. He loved Price for giving him the confidence to say that virtue and vice belong to the nature of things, unlike happiness and misery, which belong to the world of effects. Channing boasted that Price, though scorned in England, apparently influenced Immanuel Kant. He admired Price’s radicalism long before he dared to emulate it. Price was dangerously radical in his eighteenth-century British context, espousing republican causes, ministering to a Unitarian congregation in Newington Green, supporting the American Revolution, and befriending Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. Channing tutored for an aristocratic family in Richmond, Virginia, after he graduated from Harvard. Old Dominion culture was warm and colorful compared to the repressed staidness of New England.

Briefly, Channing enjoyed the contrast, until he confronted the brutality of plantation slavery. It shook him to his core and traumatized him. He wrote home: “Master and slave! Nature never made such a distinction, or established such a relation.” Channing hated everything about it, above all, that slavery stripped human beings of their right to live as moral agents: “No right is so inseparable from humanity, and so necessary to the improvement of our species, as the right of exerting the powers which nature has given us in the pursuit of any and of every good which we can obtain without doing injury to others.” He withdrew from his bewildered host family, alienated and repulsed, starving himself. He read London anarchist William Godwin, embracing Godwin’s attacks on aristocratic privilege and his vision of utopian communism. Channing ruined his health in Richmond, permanently, and frightened his widowed mother upon returning home. Shortly afterward he decided to search for truth and goodness as a minister. He took a year of divinity training at Harvard before beginning his career in 1803 as pastor of Federal Street Church in Boston.¹²

Channing’s greatest strength as a religious leader was the searing spiritual sincerity he conveyed in the pulpit, which made him a captivating speaker who didn’t need rhetorical flourishes. He didn’t know what he believed, theologically, when he began at Federal Street, and his ethical convictions were not a good fit for the rows of blue bloods to whom he preached, except as a churchy

form of religious idealism. Channing opted mostly for churchy idealism while preaching a carefully vague theology. There were three theological options in New England Congregationalism, not counting vagueness: orthodox Calvinism; New Light Calvinism, often called Hopkinsianism; and liberalism, usually called Arminianism. Channing had grown up on the New Light Calvinism of his next-door neighbor, Hopkins, a disciple of Edwards. It emphasized double predestination and hellfire but rejected the doctrines of election to grace, imputed depravity, and imputed righteousness. New Light Calvinism alleviated Calvinist orthodoxy of select doctrines while leaving others as nonnegotiable.

Since Channing gave occasional sermons that dangled sinners above the terrors of hell, he was hard to peg. He said he believed in total depravity and that all Christians *should* believe in it, but they didn't *need* to believe it. Charity and inclusiveness were more important than correct doctrine. His clerical colleagues, trying to decide whether he was a Hopkinsian or a liberal, could not tell. Channing tried to keep it that way. He prized his friendships with clerics on both sides of a partisan divide over liberalism, and his congregation didn't want to hear partisan sermons anyhow. Federal Street Church was theologically vague in Channing's fashion, loathed the French Revolution, and did not remotely identify with English Unitarianism. Rebellious English Unitarians were nothing like Federal Street elitists. But Channing and his congregation could not avoid the partisan clash that ripped apart the state churches of New England.¹³

Hosea Ballou, watching the drama of liberalism play out in the parishes and churches of the Standing Order, made an intervention in 1805 from his humble world of tiny rural Universalist congregations. He said he had meant to acquire more experience in ministry before rushing into print, and he wished that Protestants studied the Bible instead of books about the Bible by clerics and professors. Christianity was far better off before the theologians distorted it beyond recognition. But that story reached back to the fourth century, and Ballou grieved at what ordinary Christians thought they were supposed to somehow believe. He said the religion of Jesus makes far more rational and ethical sense than does so-called orthodox Christianity. The unitarian liberal Congregationalists, the Universalists, and even the deists exposed key problems, but no one synthesized in one book what went wrong in Christianity. Ballou dared to try, knowing he would be derided as an interloper lacking the requisite training, scholarship, and standing, lacking even a congregation.¹⁴

Hosea Ballou and the Gospel of Salvation

Born in 1771 as the eleventh child of a Calvinist Baptist minister in Richmond, New Hampshire, Ballou lost his mother to an early death when he was two years old and received almost no formal education. He was curious about religion from an early age, pondering his father's sermons. At the age of eighteen, Ballou came forward to be saved at a revival in Portsmouth, but did not feel the utter wretchedness described by the two revival preachers, which caused him to wonder: Was he really saved? Ballou had long acquired the habit of poring over the Bible for answers. He worked on farms for two years, puzzled over the

biblical doctrine of salvation, and met a local Universalist minister, Caleb Rich, who introduced Ballou in 1791 to the Universalist faith. Rich pointed to Paul's statement in Romans 5:18 that just as judgment fell upon all through Adam, the free gift of righteousness came upon all through Christ.

Ballou embraced Universalism, so the Baptist Church expelled him. In 1791 he began delivering Universalist sermons as an itinerant preacher in western Massachusetts and Vermont; three years later he was formally ordained by Elhanan Winchester in Oxford, Massachusetts, the homeland of Universalism. Ballou married Ruth Washburn in 1795, fathered thirteen children with her, and did not attain a settled ministry until 1809. Meanwhile he endangered his status in the Universalist Church by questioning its doctrinal foundation. Too many things that the Universalists retained from Calvinism made no sense to him. Ballou read Chauncy, embracing his unitarian perspective, which had room for Arian Christology. He read Ethan Allen's swashbuckling manifesto, *Reason, the Only Oracle of Man* (1784), which was too caustically deist for Ballou but inspiring in its insistence that the Bible must be read in the light of reason. Chauncy, Allen, and, to a lesser extent, Priestley, set Ballou free to ascertain what he really believed, which for him was not a different issue than determining what the Bible really teaches.¹⁵

By 1795 he was already preaching a Unitarian version of Universalism. Ballou said he was not the type to move left or right based on outward circumstances; he was an apostle of the gospel of Christ as he understood it. For a while he joined a circuit-riding ministry centered in Hardwick, Massachusetts, where Ballou clarified that he retained one thing from Calvinism: a strong notion of divine sovereignty. Most New England Arminians taught that salvation depends on obeying God's will, a moral choice. Ballou was too Calvinist to say that; his hope was entirely in the sovereign atoning love of God. During the years that Ballou wrote and published *A Treatise on Atonement*, he preached in Barnard, Vermont, and its surrounding towns. The book was personal, rural, colloquial, and engaging, like his sermons. Its folksy-preacher style, however, did not spare readers from plunging into lay philosophy.

Ballou swiftly took readers into the issue that converted him to Universalism: How can the sins of very limited and fallible creatures deserve infinite punishment? What kind of worldview imagines that such a predicament is plausible? Ballou extricated everything he didn't believe in Reformed orthodoxy from these questions. It was unbelievable by reason and unsupported by the Bible to claim that sin is infinite, it deserves an infinite punishment, and the eternal God "took on himself a natural body of flesh and blood, and actually suffered death on a cross, to satisfy his infinite justice, and thereby save his creatures from endless misery." Nothing, Ballou argued, brings more discredit on Christianity than the "unreasonable dogmas" it has imposed on itself. If sin is infinite and unlimited, it cannot be superseded by any principle or being, even God. If sin is infinite because it is committed against an infinite law, God's aim in legislating the law is thwarted by sin: "The design of Deity must be abortive." If God is all-powerful but sends human souls to burn in hell, it was no act of love or goodness for God to create human beings. Ballou stressed that if orthodoxy is correct, God is not the Supreme Being and not worthy of being worshiped. But in the gospel, sin is finite, its miserable effects are experienced

entirely in worldly life, and God's infinite atoning love saves all human beings after their death.¹⁶

Ballou did not claim to fathom the ecumenical councils that produced the Nicene Trinity and Chalcedonian Christology. He lacked the training and languages for church-history scholarship and knew he would be blasted for venturing onto scholarly turf. But Allen had set him free of worrying overmuch about it. Deists didn't hesitate to skewer Christian doctrines, even when they knew nothing of Apollinarianism, Monophysitism, Monothelism, and Nestorianism. They made an impact by charging that Christian doctrines are absurd. Ballou said the deists were often right. The church somehow contorted itself into declaring "that the Mediator is *really God*; that the Godhead consists of *three distinct persons*, viz.[.] *Father, Son, and Holy Ghost*; that these *distinct persons* are equal in power and glory, and *eternally and essentially one!*" Ballou was appalled. If the Godhead consists of three distinct persons and each of these persons is infinite, "the *whole Godhead* amounts to the amazing sum of infinity, multiplied by three!" Christianity, he charged, made itself indefensible. No finite being can suffer an infinite punishment in any period of time. No infinite being can suffer. New Light Calvinists improved the substitution theory by reasoning that Jesus died to uphold God's honor, not to appease God's wrath; Ballou replied that God's reputation didn't need a boost. In the Bible, the Mediator is a created dependent being who prays to the Eternal Father, acknowledges the superiority of the Father, and cautions that only the Father knows the day and hour of the divine judgment. To be sure, Jesus prayed that his disciples might be one even as he and the Father were one, but Ballou said the oneness of the Father and Son was "agreement in the great work which he has undertaken." Jesus came to fulfill the will and complete the work of the Father.¹⁷

Ballou told his fellow Universalists they got the main thing right: universal salvation based on the infinite atoning love of God. He helped to write the Universalist creed, the Winchester Profession of 1803 at Winchester, New Hampshire, which was carefully brief, running three sentences. It said the eternal love of God "will finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness," and that "holiness and true happiness are inseparably connected." Sin makes people miserable and holiness makes them happy. Ballou sensed that the Universalists were moving in his direction. They needed a theology that fit their belief in God's boundless love. He became the leading Universalist by providing it. Ballou had already swung the Universalists in his direction when he finally attained a call to a settled pastorate in 1809, in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Six years later he moved to Salem, Massachusetts, and in 1817 he was called to the new Universalist congregation in Boston, Second Universalist Church. There, for thirty-five years in the citadel of liberal religion, he dropped his back-country accent and folk sayings, writing polished sermons, which did not stop Unitarian leaders from scorning him as a country rube.¹⁸

Ballou steered clear of Murray until he died in 1815; otherwise Ballou battled for theological victories until he died in 1852. He revised *A Treatise on Atonement* many times, dropped Arian Christology, and battled Restorationist Universalists, who said there must a purgative punishment for sin in the afterlife. The early Ballou deferred reluctantly to his friend Edward Turner on the question of afterlife punishment, mostly on the strength of 1 Peter 3:18–20—Christ preached

to the spirits in prison after his death and resurrection. In 1817, Ballou denied that the doctrine of future punishment has any biblical basis or improves in any way upon pure Universalism. The spirits of 1 Peter must have been living Gentiles, for the gospel faith is that earthly life is always punishment enough for sin. The soul is purified at death by divine love and enters immortality. The Universalists fought over this position through the 1820s, falling into schism in 1831. Ballou's cousin Adin Ballou, a pastor in Milford, Massachusetts, was a ringleader of the breakaway Restorationists. He said his cousin was too proud of taking an extreme position that put Universalism out of bounds for potential converts from other Protestant traditions. Hosea Ballou stoutly defended what he called "Ultra Universalism" to the end of his days, a position that waned in his denomination in his last years and subsequently disappeared. Most of the breakaway Restorationists returned to the Universalists or became Unitarians. Nearly all Universalist leaders of the later nineteenth century believed in the doctrine of future punishment. They were also more concerned with social-reform issues than Ballou had been and did not carry forward his appetite for theological conflict.¹⁹

Ballou became the leader of the Universalists by leading with his convictions and battling for victories. Channing became the leader of the Unitarians by failing to avoid a factional blowout over liberalism. He preferred to liberalize quietly without fighting about it; to Channing, that was the liberal way. Party-line thinking of any kind repelled him. "Liberal party" was oxymoronic, since liberality is about freedom, liberty, and generosity, not a bundle of opinions. A truly liberal theology would not establish a fixed position. It would be peaceable and welcoming, like him. Channing preached mildly liberal sermons about Infinite Mind willing the perfection of human minds in knowledge, love, and action, letting congregants hear it in their way. If they heard an echo of orthodoxy and needed to hear it, he was fine with that. Inwardly, he believed that Calvinist theology is ethically repugnant, but railing about it was not his style, nor that of his congregation. Moreover, being ethically repulsed did not settle what he should believe theologically. Calvinists did not say that Calvinism is nice or attractive. Channing was repulsed by Calvinism long before he was willing to say it was false. He stirred himself to come out as a liberal only after conservatives attacked his friends.

Unitarian Christianity

The battle over liberalism got very personal in New England. The conservatives who lost Harvard had to found a seminary of their own, Andover. Some said hard things about Harvard falling into the hands of infidels. Channing, determined to straddle the issue, kept saying that charity and inclusiveness are the most important things, but that argument aligned him with the liberal camp. In 1812 the leader of the liberal party, Joseph Stevens Buckminster, died unexpectedly at the age of thirty-eight. Buckminster taught at Harvard, ministered at upscale Brattle Street Church in Boston, eloquently in both contexts, and introduced Americans to German biblical criticism. His passing left a void that Channing struggled to fill just before the USA fell into war against England and

the campaign against liberals peaked. Channing railed incredulously against the War of 1812: how in God's name could the USA align with the enemy of civilization, France, against England? This outraged position played very well in Federalist New England, where everything French was bad. Meanwhile, liberal clerics were accused of anti-Christian heresy and deceit. Channing defended their religious integrity, and his own, pleading with conservatives to be more charitable. Bantering about doctrinal labels, he said, would hurt the church. The liberals grew tired of defending themselves. In 1819, Channing changed course, declaring that liberals should wear Unitarianism as a badge of honor since they were going to be accused of it anyway.²⁰

They were, in fact, Unitarians. In the Baltimore Sermon of 1819 that split the parishes and churches of the Standing Order, Channing said the Bible is like the book of nature in being authored by a rational divine mind, and liberals were faithful to a rational interpretation of the Bible. He disliked historical criticism, still preferring the old rationalist scholarship of Samuel Clarke, although Channing managed to say that liberal Christians could live with historical criticism. He believed that the Bible is rational because God is rational, and that God is one being with one mind, just as the Bible says. Thus, the Bible makes sense and Trinitarian doctrine does not. A hellenizing church invented the Trinity, straying too far from its Jewish origins. Tragically, the Trinitarian idea transferred to Christ the "supreme affection" that Christians owe to the Father. Channing charged that Christian piety was grievously distorted by the church's fixation on "a bleeding, suffering God." Later, the same idolatrous impulse created the cult of the Virgin Mary. The purpose of true religion, he implored, is to "spiritualize the mind," not to create gods in our image. Liberal Christians needed to recover the refined spiritual discipline that worships "a Father in heaven, a pure spirit, invisible and unapproachable, save by the reflecting and purified mind."²¹

If God is one being with one mind, it follows that distinguishing between Christ's human and divine natures was another hellenizing mistake, although Channing bypassed the Arian-versus-Socinian issue that divided liberal Christians. This was a moment for Unitarian unity. Arians upheld the ancient doctrine that Christ was preexistent as a product of the Father, and thus a subordinate deity. Socinians denied the preexistence of Christ but accepted his miraculous birth. Channing declined to adjudicate how Unitarians should settle the doctrine of Christ, except to say that the Bible plainly assumes Christ's subordination to the Father, and orthodox Christology is balefully speculative, dualistic, and incongruous. Orthodox Christology imagined an infinite disjunction between the human and divine minds of Christ as he died on Calvary. Liberal Christianity assumed, with the Gospels, that Jesus was a unified being who died in Godforsaken agony on the cross.

Above all, Channing identified Unitarian Christianity with an exalted view of God's moral character. It was perverse to laud God as perfectly good while portraying God as a vindictive monster whose wrath must be appeased. Every form of Christianity assigned high attributes to God, but only liberal Christianity conceived God's purposes, actions, and feelings as infinitely loving and perfectly good. Channing lingered on this theme, knowing it was his strongest point. Bad religion, he said, "tends strongly to pervert the moral faculty, to form a gloomy, forbidding, and servile religion, and to lead men to substitute

ensoriousness, bitterness, and persecution for a tender and impartial charity." Good religion praises God as the perfection of virtue, not as overpowering: "We cannot bow before a being, however great and powerful, who governs tyrannically. We respect nothing but excellence, whether on earth or in heaven. We venerate not the loftiness of God's throne, but the equity and goodness in which it is established." A good father, Channing reasoned, loves his children by looking out for them, caring for them, taking joy in their progress, punishing their misdeeds, and readily accepting their penitence—a far cry from the vengeful Calvinist deity who predestined human souls to eternal punishment.²²

To Channing, atonement theory was more perplexing, except for the traditional objective theories, which were horrible, bent on appeasing a horrible God. Liberal Christians believed in moral and spiritual atonement: the actual saving of human beings from their bondage to sin. They believed that Christ accomplished this purpose by various means including his compassionate moral example, religious teaching, promise of forgiveness, sacrificial suffering and death, and resurrection to new life. Some liberals, Channing said, believed that Christ's death on Calvary made the forgiveness of sin possible in some way, while others were like him in doubting that Scripture is clear on this point. In either case, atonement is about moral and spiritual deliverance and reconciliation, not the sacrificial payment of a debt, an appeasement of God's wrath, or the satisfaction of God's honor, atrocious ideas that turn God into a monster. Channing brushed off the patipassianist option that God suffered in Christ's suffering. God cannot suffer, so why strain to save the objective sacrifice model? What matters in atonement is every person's bondage to sin and liberation from it.

The Baltimore Sermon ignited a firestorm of controversy that made Channing famous. It inspired liberals to proclaim what they really believed and provided a foil for conservatives who finally had an openly declared enemy. It sparked pamphlet wars that raged into the 1830s and led to the founding of the American Unitarian Association in 1825, formalizing the schism in Congregationalism. The Unitarian schism formally established a Christian fellowship that shared defining beliefs with the Universalists. Ballou welcomed Channing's emphasis on reason and his decision to stop being defensive about non-Trinitarianism. But Unitarians and Universalists felt very little affinity with each other, to put it mildly. Unitarians benefited from the religious tax that still existed in most New England states. They looked down on the rebellious, low-status, mostly rural Universalists, who resented it. Channing preached a theology of self-culture, contended that some sinners were incorrigible, and insisted that retribution must occur in a future life. In 1832, after the Universalists split over Ultra-Universalism, Channing chided that Ultra-Universalism was utterly irrational. He blasted Ballou's claim that sin always receives its punishment on earth, without deigning to mention Ballou. Ballou recoiled at this treatment. To him, self-culture smacked of moral self-salvation, a Unitarian conceit. Incorrigibility language contradicted the cardinal Universalist belief. Not being named meant that he was too far beneath Channing to be recognized. The two icons of Unitarianism and Universalism, despite living one-eighth of a mile from each other on Beacon Hill for decades, never met in person.²³

Mostly, Channing left the battles over theology to others. He had a threefold idea of Unitarian Christianity resting on Christian experience, the Bible, and proofs of Christian doctrines and the biblical miracles, which he said provided sure foundations for liberal Christianity. His wary acceptance of historical criticism staked a position between old-style rationalists who abhorred what German critics did to the Bible and younger clerics who welcomed Eichhorn-style deconstruction of the biblical text. Harvard professors Andrews Norton and Henry Ware Sr. led the rationalist faction that fought the new type of biblical criticism. Buckminster's youthful successors in Unitarian pulpits, notably Henry Ware Jr. and John Emery Abbott, led the pro-historicist faction. The latter figures turned out to be forerunners of the transcendentalist reaction, but that was ironic because transcendentalism was anti-historical. Channing's idea of Unitarian Christianity had a short run because its foundations did not fit together, and it was blown away by an exciting religious movement, Emersonian transcendentalism.²⁴

Being rational was as crucial to the Unitarian founders as being good. Every point of contention with conservatives came down to a claim about rational coherence, or moral worthiness, or how these things went together. Twenty of the twenty-five original Congregational churches in Massachusetts became Unitarian, and nearly a hundred churches in Massachusetts overall; in Boston, only the Old South Church remained Congregationalist. Channing boasted that Calvinist orthodoxy was losing its power to terrify and depress people. Liberal Christianity reclaimed the right of Christians to believe only believable things and to worship a loving and just God. In 1821, Channing made a case at Harvard for using reason to defend revealed religion. He disputed Hume's contention that all testimonies to miracles conflict with the laws of nature known to human experience. Hume's argument, Channing said, subverts the very order of nature on which his weak appeal to sensory knowledge depends. God is the author of the order of nature. The serious question is why God would cause a miracle, not if God has the power to do it. Channing answered that God's purpose is always "to form and advance the mind." The order of nature is the means of God's purpose, not an end in itself.²⁵

Ralph Waldo Emerson was in the audience, having been raised in Boston Congregationalism. His father, William Emerson, was pastor of First Church in Boston and a pillar of liberal Congregationalism. William Emerson was a rationalistic Unitarian in theology, a Federalist elitist in politics, and a stern father, though perhaps not as cold or severe as Emerson famously claimed. Like Channing, Emerson retained mostly negative memories of a father who died young, acquiring the religious strain in his personality from his mother. He also had a brilliant aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, who provided a model of literary creativity. Emerson was dreamy, underachieving, and a bit lost until Harvard prodigy Edward Everett returned to Harvard in 1819 from graduate studies at Göttingen and taught students how to deconstruct ancient texts in German fashion. Emerson woke up, enthralled by Everett's display of eloquence and novel learning. With surprised delight he heard Channing lecture at Harvard, judging that his family's old friend conveyed a poetic spirit much like Everett's. Channing's rationalistic evidence rolled off Emerson as standard Unitarian fare. Theology was about proofs, evidence, and abstract distinctions. The

revelation was that Channing conveyed spiritual creativity. If the pulpit could be a venue for imaginative, evocative, artful speech, Emerson could imagine himself as a minister.²⁶

Emerson's studies at Harvard Divinity School confirmed to him that a reasoning machine, even if it belonged to Locke or Clarke, does not produce good theology. Imagination makes theology worthwhile, even beautiful. Channing made theology beautiful because he had a luminous moral imagination, not because he mastered a bunch of intellectual arguments. Emerson experienced his courses as drudgery, wishing he could join his brother William Emerson at Göttingen, but that would have required learning German. His brother exhorted him to learn German, study Schleiermacher and Johann G. Herder, and get started on Hebrew, none of which Emerson could bear, partly because he had tuberculosis, at the time called consumption, like half the adults in Boston. His eyes and limbs suffered from painful rheumatic inflammation, making it difficult to do academic work that he found tedious. Emerson studied privately with Channing, who burdened him with Bible concordances, lexicons, atlases, commentaries, and language aids. Channing's preaching, however, thrilled him: "Dr. Channing is preaching sublime sermons every Sunday morning in Federal Street[,] one of which I heard last Sunday, . . . which infinitely surpassed Everett's eloquence." To Emerson, inspiration was what mattered: creative spiritual art that lit up the self and its world.²⁷

Some found Channing's style unadorned by Romantic standards, but Emerson found it beautiful for not overusing emotive coloring and wordplay. Always the struggle against tuberculosis played a role in Emerson's yearning for inspiration. He sought respite from coldness and debilitation in Charleston, South Carolina, and St. Augustine, Florida, unsuccessfully. Two of his brothers died young from tuberculosis; in 1828, the year before he entered the ministry, Emerson married eighteen-year-old Ellen Louisa Tucker, who was seriously ill with tuberculosis. That year Channing gave a major address titled "Likeness to God" that opened the door to Emersonian transcendentalism. He said he believed as strongly as ever in the rationality of scriptural revelation and the historicity of the biblical miracles, but the proof "from nature and reason" concerning the likeness of humanity to God was so convincing that no appeal to revelation was necessary. This proof is best construed, Channing said, by asking how we obtain our ideas of God. The answer is that we derive them "from our own souls. . . . The divine attributes are first developed in ourselves, and thence transferred to our Creator. The idea of God, sublime and awful as it is, is the idea of our own spiritual nature, purified and enlarged to infinity. In ourselves are the elements of the Divinity."²⁸

This was the germ of transcendentalism, notwithstanding that Channing never stopped believing in a personal God who created the world and intervenes in history. Every human spirit, he said, is the proof of Divinity, "which can only be understood by experience." What matters in Christianity is to feel God's presence. In the language of belief, we speak of God as a Mind; in the belief language of revelation, God is described as a Spirit. But what do we know of mind apart from the unfolding of this principle in experience? Channing answered, "That unbounded spiritual energy which we call God is conceived by us only through consciousness, through the knowledge of ourselves." We

ascribe thought and intelligence to God because these are indispensable faculties of our own souls: "The Infinite Light would be for ever hidden from us did not kindred rays dawn and brighten within us. God is another name for human intelligence raised above all error and imperfection, and extended to all possible truth." More important, the same principle applies to our knowledge of divine goodness. Channing said we know the perfections of God only through the likeness that we bear to God in our moral nature. We cannot understand anything about God's purity or benevolence if we have never allowed our selfishness to be swallowed by love. Nothing compares to moral feeling in proving our resemblance to God.²⁹

He did not mean that God is only within us and is not without us. Channing proclaimed that the universe is filled with God's glory. The signs and effects of God's power, wisdom, and goodness appear throughout creation, but only to a kindred mind. We perceive the divine mind in creation only by participating in the same energy of thought that created the universe. We know the wisdom of Deity because the same wisdom dwells within us. Put differently, in what became a favorite transcendentalist image: "In truth, the beauty and glory of God's works are revealed to the mind by a light beaming from itself." Channing stressed the contrast to Calvinism: God is not honored by self-abasing praise that leaves us unchanged in our hopelessness. To honor God is to approach God "as an inexhaustible fountain of light, power, and purity. It is to feel the quickening and transforming energy of his perfections." Channing revered human nature without ignoring the predatory evils of human beings. He said he understood why so many people believed that humans are beasts, safe only in chains, and needing masters. Good religion struggles against terrible human proclivities. But disbelieving in humanity's divine goodness would never improve the world: "I bless it for its kind affections, for its growth and progress under the weight of so many chains and prejudices, for its achievements in science and art, and still more for its examples of heroic and saintly virtue."³⁰

Channing knew Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth personally and quoted their Romantic poetry profusely. He said he cited them because the light shone through them, not because they achieved authority. We get nowhere in religion if we begin with somebody else's word. He found language for his experience of the divine when he read Coleridge and Wordsworth, who grasped that our souls are fallible, since we are not God. At the dedication of Harvard's Divinity Hall in 1826, Channing implored the divinity professors to cultivate liberty-loving ministers who were true to their own souls. Nothing grieves the Holy Spirit more than insincerity. Only the minister who speaks out of personal understanding and experience can declare the Word of Christ with convicting power. He dedicated Harvard Divinity School to religious feeling, but stressed that feeling can be deceptive or corrupting. Love-inspiring spiritual experience, though revelatory, does not make us infallible interpreters of the Spirit or endow us with supernatural power. After Emerson brushed Channing aside, Channing grieved that Emerson and his followers fell into "a kind of *ego-theism*," blurring the distinction between the self as a partaker of divinity and divinity itself. He did not identify God with consciousness or the world spirit, disliking very much that Emerson construed God as the human spirit writ large.³¹

Without Channing's inspiring example, Emerson would not have found himself in a pulpit. In 1829 he began preaching as junior pastor at Second Church, Boston, where Henry Ware Jr. and, later, Chandler Robbins were the senior ministers. Emerson's early sermons were sprinkled with standard apologetic arguments, but mindful of his brother's chastening experience at Göttingen. William Emerson dropped theology after finding that Eichhorn's historical criticism, which excited him at first, drained away the faith that caused him to study divinity in the first place. If German scholarship sundered the historical basis of Christianity, he could not be a minister; he was better off as a lawyer. Mary Moody Emerson, infuriated by this outcome, exhorted Emerson—who started going by "Waldo" in his last year of college—to preach Pauline theology, a sturdy foundation. He replied that spiritual experience is a better foundation for religious belief than any historically based creed: "I know that I exist, and that a part of me, as essential as memory or reason, is a desire that another being exist." Then the American edition of Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* was published in 1829, and Emerson enthused at finding an author who spoke to him, inspired him, refuted Hume's skepticism, and caught what matters in religion: imagination.³²

Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Post-Kantian Idealism

Coleridge had barely survived decades of opium addiction, near-death experiences, and wasted genius to become, in the 1820s, a spiritual oracle. He was nine years old in 1781 when his father, an Anglican parish priest, suffered a fatal heart attack; Coleridge was shipped to a wretched charity school in Greyfriars, London. Introverted, bookish, intensely lonely, brilliant, and inclined to reverie, he was scarred by spending the rest of his childhood in a Dickensian orphanage. Coleridge got his first dose of opium after catching rheumatic fever. His assiduous reading got him into Jesus College, Cambridge, in 1791, where he embraced the Unitarianism and Jacobin radicalism of his favorite tutor, William Friend, who was expelled. Coleridge morphed to a communist nature-romanticism that he called "Pantisocracy," combined with hard partying. He dropped out of Cambridge, joined the large Dissenting community in Bristol, and teamed with radical poet Robert Southey to promote Pantisocracy. He and Southey married the sisters Sarah Fricker and Edith Fricker in 1795, the same year that Coleridge met Wordsworth, the turning point of his life. Coleridge launched a radical journal, *The Watchman*, and wrote sonnets. Some were long and formal, in Milton's style; most were direct, personal, and spontaneous, introducing a new kind of English poetry. In 1796 he shut down the journal, deeply in debt and miserable in his marriage, contemplating two options: study Kant and Romanticism in Germany, or settle down as a Unitarian pastor in Bristol.³³

The Napoleonic Wars (1803–15) cooled Coleridge's ardor for radical politics and pushed British politics to the right. For the rest of his life he denied, falsely, that he had ever been a Jacobin radical and emphasized, correctly, that he had always been religious, yearning for the infinite spiritual source and power of all things. Coleridge and Wordsworth invented English Romanticism while

scratching for a living and plotting to finance a trip to Germany. They bonded over shared genius and their desire to write about things considered inappropriate for poetry: everyday occurrences, rural life, seascapes, fantasy, madness. They believed that poetry should be naturalistic and imaginative. Wordsworth was longer on naturalism, and Coleridge emphasized imagination, but each had both. In 1798 they put English Romanticism on the map with a stunning collection of poems titled *Lyrical Ballads*. There were twenty-three poems, only one was a ballad, and only four were by Coleridge: Wordsworth wrote faster and considered himself the stronger figure. But Coleridge's poems were breathtaking: "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," a sublime medieval ballad; "Kubla Khan," a symbolic poem about the Asian emperor Kublai Khan; part one of the narrative poem "Christabel," an abduction story of protean ambiguity, with Gothic motifs, later favored by vampire novelists; and "The Nightingale," a conversation poem celebrating the instinctive joy of nightingale songs, which refuted Milton's notion of the nightingale as a melancholy bird. These were the greatest poems that Coleridge ever wrote, along with the second part of "Christabel," which he completed in 1800, and "Dejection: An Ode," published in 1802 after his health collapsed.³⁴

Lyrical Ballads paid Coleridge and Wordsworth's way to Germany, where they soon parted: Coleridge wanted to study transcendental philosophy, and Wordsworth wanted seclusion with his sister muse, Dorothy Wordsworth, to write poems. Coleridge spent ten months in Germany, notably four months at Göttingen, where he heard Eichhorn lecture; plotted a book on Johann Gottfried Herder; and spurned pleas from his wife to come home. His infant son Berkeley died of smallpox and Coleridge refused to come home, destroying his marriage. In 1800 he moved to Keswick to be near Wordsworth. Coleridge was already on the downward path, at age twenty-seven. He suffered from depression, anxiety, overwork, rheumatism, marital misery, financial insecurity, and his devastating dependence on laudanum (opium powder in alcohol). It crushed him to realize that Wordsworth looked down on him. Coleridge sustained their friendship by telling himself that Wordsworth was right: Even his best poems were overwrought, comparing poorly to Wordsworth. Coleridge fell in love with Dorothy Wordsworth's best friend, Sara Hutchinson, plus her entire family, which was uplifting for a while but also maddening since he could not marry his true love, and she didn't want him anyway.

His health collapsed in January 1801, and he struggled with opium addiction for the rest of his life. Coleridge poured out literary criticism, journalism, and poetry, pondered his religious philosophy, and filled notebooks with his reflections on Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Herder, subjectivity, polarity, and the Trinity. He loved the idea of a transcendental ground of freedom and spirituality, telling a friend he was finished with atheists. He returned to Anglicanism and the Trinity, conceiving the Trinity as a tri-unity of unity and distinction held together by Will, not being. He took a three-year cruise on the Mediterranean, half expecting to die, drifting from Malta to Sicily to Rome. He wrote a pastoral letter to Sara Coleridge's wayward younger brother George Fricker, recalling that he had been a Socinian for many years and sometimes almost a naturalist, but his terrible health problems and sorrows forced him to look into himself, which drove him back to Christ. Rationalistic religion lost Jesus

and his redemption, Coleridge said. It lost the tri-union of God as Will, the idea of Jesus as Logos, and Christian salvation: the redemption of corrupted will. Even Locke and Butler conceded too much to the mechanistic culture of atheism, producing more infidels. Coleridge, knowing he desperately needed saving, gently advised Fricker that modern people needed to look “into their own souls, instead of always looking out.”³⁵

That was in October 1806, near the end of Coleridge’s first brush with death. He rallied upon returning to Keswick and made a splash as a bravura public lecturer in London. Coleridge was one of the great talkers, best when he riffed without notes. He founded a newspaper, *The Friend*, and tried to persuade readers that post-Kantian philosophy was superior to British empiricism. He lived with Wordsworth, who wearied of Coleridge’s chaotic, sullen, slovenly, opium-fueled, demanding, half-crazed behavior in his home, leading to a break with Wordsworth that devastated Coleridge. He crashed spectacularly, nearly dying of overdosed benders. From 1811 to 1814, just as Coleridge disintegrated, the narrative verse-romance that he and Wordsworth pioneered soared as a popular genre. Coleridge despaired at missing his cultural moment. He realized he had to face his demons or die; writing and lecturing no longer kept them at bay. He enlisted medical treatment and confessed to friends, but not to his family, that he risked lethal overdose every day.³⁶

For years Coleridge had crammed his notebooks with material for a major work on the divine unity of the world, to be titled “Logosophia.” It would draw deeply on Kant, Schelling, and Johann G. Fichte, but in Coleridge’s Anglican fashion, ending with a commentary on the Gospel of John. Hegel was not in his canon because Coleridge absorbed Kant, Schelling, and Fichte before Hegel came along, and he remained closer to Schelling afterward. Coleridge struggled and failed to write his masterwork, until it occurred to him that he should start with a literary autobiography. That would get him rolling toward the metaphysical section, plus make it comprehensible. This plan got him started on a rambling rendering of his literary career, but Coleridge decided the metaphysical part couldn’t wait, because it was foundational to everything he believed. He rewrote the book extensively, now titled *Biographia Literaria* (published as 2 vols. in 1817). It started with memoir, moved to metaphysics, and ended with literary criticism, but scraps of each section spilled into the others. The memoir section was not a confession; Coleridge said almost nothing about his addiction or marriage. He modeled the memoir on Wordsworth’s as-yet-unpublished *Prelude*, except as prose, stressing the distinction between fancy and imagination that Wordsworth borrowed from Coleridge.³⁷

Coleridge said there are two kinds of imagination. The primary imagination is the living power of all perception, “a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.” The secondary imagination is an echo of the primary imagination, differing from it only in the degree and mode of its operation: “It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify.” In both cases, imagination is essentially vital and transformative, inspiring all creativity. Fancy, on the other hand, is merely passive and mechanical. It imitates and distorts, but does not create. Coleridge praised Wordsworth as the poetic genius of the age, but Wordsworth never studied Kant, so he did

not grasp the meaning of the poetic revolution that he and Coleridge inaugurated. Then Wordsworth canonized an unimaginative account of it that marginalized Coleridge, wrongly on both counts. Coleridge told friends that for many years he wrongly exalted Wordsworth over himself to the detriment of his own reputation; *Biographia Literaria* settled that score.³⁸

But Coleridge had greater things at stake. His subject was the unifying transcendent meaning of human experience from rational perception (which he called Understanding) to artistic vision (which he called Imagination), to transcendent intuition (which he called Reason). Kant and Fichte, he said, saved him from the Locke and Hume tradition he imbibed at Cambridge. Locke overestimated his ability to deduce concepts of the understanding from experience without appealing to a priori concepts. Hume realized that a pure concept such as “pure mathematics” must have an a priori origin, but he could not explain the unification of synthetic judgments in the understanding. Coleridge lauded Kant for showing that the understanding itself, through its transcendental concepts, authors the experience in which its concepts are found. Kant revolutionized philosophy by doing so, but there were problems with Kant, as Schelling showed. Coleridge walked readers through Schelling’s critique of Kantian dualism, which corrected Kant without lapsing into Fichte’s subjective idealism.³⁹

Here Coleridge had a tricky problem, which he handled badly. He was deeply dependent on Schelling, who had no English audience until Coleridge created one for him in *Biographia Literaria*. Coleridge worried what critics would say about his Schelling problem. He pasted entire translated paragraphs of Schelling’s work straight into his book with no acknowledgment, presenting Schelling’s words as his own. Coleridge’s metaphysical position was nearly the same as Schelling’s, which made him look like an epigone, with or without the plagiarism. But Coleridge had always been motivated by religious concerns, unlike Schelling. He could have said so, noting that Schelling took a religious turn in 1809, which would have highlighted that Coleridge worked out his religious thought independently of Schelling and before Schelling held such concerns. Instead, he claimed he never read much of Schelling, what he read was piecemeal and late, and he didn’t mind if readers credited the overlaps to Schelling. Coleridge was sufficiently traumatized by what he borrowed from Schelling that he failed to explain how his position differed from Schelling. He was drawn, for religious reasons, to thinkers that conceived reality as a dynamic relationship of opposite poles. He loved Giordano Bruno, Nicholas of Cusa, and Jacob Boehme (Jakob Böhme) for this reason. All described the life process as a constant generation of polar opposites that are not mere contrasts. Bruno had a theory of dynamic polarity. Nicholas had a similar theory of the coincidence of opposites, which he fashioned into a Logos theology. Boehme had a mystical, dipolar Logos theology marred by alchemical speculations. To Coleridge, Kant was the greatest theorist of dynamic polarity, in his dialectic of sensibility and understanding. Kant led him to Schelling, who improved on Kant.⁴⁰

Schelling came late to a Christian understanding of divine reality as panentheistic distinction-in-unity and never with Coleridge’s emphasis on the Trinity. Philosophically, however, Schelling and Coleridge had the same absolute idealism. Nature is the sum of all objective things, and intelligence (or, the self) is the sum of all that is subjective. Nature is exclusively represented and lacking in

consciousness, while intelligence is exclusively representative and conscious. The objective and subjective mutually exclude each other, yet all positive knowledge requires a reciprocal concurrence of these two factors. To Coleridge it was better to say, with Schelling, that mind derives from nature and nature derives from mind, than to say with (the early) Fichte (and arguably Kant) that everything derives from an act of free self-positing. *Biographia Literaria* rambled but also sparkled to its concluding vision of divine creative power communicated through imagination. Coleridge spiritualized post-Kantian thought distinctly, declaring that reason is in accord with faith, and faith is but the continuation of reason into the twilight, stealing into darkness.⁴¹

The reviews were horrible. Nearly every reviewer blasted Coleridge for publishing a sprawling disorganized mess of a book. Reviewers exhausted the connotations of obscure, inscrutable, and unhinged to dismiss Coleridge's metaphysical sections, sometimes pointing knowingly to his personal afflictions. Whatever German idealism was about, English readers didn't need to know. The reviews were so brutal that Coleridge got a backlash reaction that made his later career possible. England's Romantic movement was still reviled, except by radicals and a handful of academics. Percy Bysshe Shelley had less than a hundred readers when he died in 1822, but Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, and John Keats lifted up Coleridge as the genius of Romanticism. Coleridge rose with the Romantic ascension that canonized Shelley and Keats; he enjoyed the irony that he owed his renaissance to radical feminists.⁴²

In his last years he worked on a strange, prolix book originally titled "The Beauties of Archbishop Leighton." Coleridge loved Robert Leighton, a seventeenth-century Scottish Presbyterian minister and Anglican bishop whose scriptural commentaries helped Coleridge survive his overdose meltdown of 1813. Coleridge reprinted Leighton's best passages and responded to them in a commentary on a commentary titled *Aids to Reflection* (1825). The book morphed into a collection of aphorisms, playing up Coleridge's opposition to rationalist apologetics. One was immortalized by citation: "He, who begins by loving Christianity better than Truth, will proceed by loving his own Sect or Church better than Christianity, and end in loving himself better than all." To Coleridge, this aphorism was about the necessity of doubt and intellectual openness. God is not a Christian, and if God is the author of Truth, there is no reason to fear any truth.⁴³

For twenty years he had pondered a revision of Kant's distinction between sensibility (*Sinnlichkeit*, the power to receive representations) and understanding (*Verstand*, the power of reasoning by means of representations). In 1806 Coleridge adopted the post-Kantian convention of calling it the distinction between Reason and Understanding. Reason correlated with *noumena* and Understanding with *phaenomena*. In essence, Coleridge spiritualized Kant's transcendentalism by conceiving Reason as constitutive, the revelation of an immortal soul, not merely regulative. The Understanding apprehends contingent things of experience, while Reason works in the realm of necessity and universality, containing within itself the revelatory law of its conceptions. In *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge invoked the distinction between Reason and Understanding as a parallel to that of imagination and fancy, describing Reason as transcendent intuition. *Aids to Reflection* pressed hard on the upshot.⁴⁴

Coleridge was a Kantian concerning the ground of morality, and thus of religion: it must be intuitive if the notion of moral truth is to be secured. Just as Kant distinguished between the sense-bound knowledge of pure reason and the intuitive, constitutively human knowledge of practical reason, Coleridge described the Understanding as sense-bound and Reason as sense-transcendent. The Understanding processes knowledge derived wholly from experience, while Reason gives birth to thought and life-enhancing action. The Understanding is discursive, but Reason is fixed. The Understanding is a reflective faculty that abstracts, names, and compares, bringing no immediate truths. Reason is essentially spiritual, the realm of conscience, contemplation, and insight—the transcendent power of intuition. The wellspring of religion is the revelatory power of being, Reason, not the sense-bound knowledge of the Understanding. The Understanding produces theologies but has no knowledge of religious experience since religion is about powers of will and being, not understanding. This claim yielded Coleridge's most famous epigram: "Christianity is not a theory, or a speculation, but a life. Not a philosophy of life, but a life and a living process." So how can the truth of Christianity be proved? He had a two-word answer: "Try it." And what kind of life is it? He said it was the life of being redeemed.⁴⁵

Coleridge was slow to get the followers he wanted in the Church of England, though he lived to see it happen, at Cambridge. In 1825 precious few Britons were willing to struggle with post-Kantian metaphysics. His first group of Anglican followers came along at Trinity College, Cambridge, enthused by *Aids to Reflection*. They read Coleridge as the prophet of a Broad Church third way between High Church and Low Church Anglicanism, although the greatest of Coleridge's theological disciples, Frederick Denison Maurice, said that party-line thinking is inherently bad. Coleridge, to Maurice, was the apostle of Anglican unity, not the founder of a third party. Coleridge's emphasis on the corruption of the will helped to mitigate, for many nineteenth-century Anglicans, his sharp rejection of juridical atonement. Salvation is precisely redemption of the will. American evangelical Calvinist James Marsh, introducing the American edition of 1829, caught the book's evangelical note and something equally important: Coleridge offered deliverance from Locke. Evangelicals should not be empiricists, Marsh said, but they had no alternative until Coleridge showed that knowing and being are inseparably linked. Emerson, reading the American edition, skipped past Coleridge's insistence that the will is essentially corrupt. What mattered was the book's ringing, intoxicating transcendentalism. Emerson loved the distinction between Reason and Understanding. It thrilled him that he finally had an alternative to Hume's skepticism, in Coleridge's claim that the self possesses an active power of self-determination.⁴⁶

American Transcendentalism

Emerson copied into his journal Coleridge's maxim "*Quantum scimus sumus*" (We are what we know). Coleridge's next sentence was equally important to him: "That which we find within ourselves, which is more than ourselves, and yet the ground of whatever is good and permanent therein, is the substance

and life of all other knowledge." These maxims set Emerson free to preach only the part of Channing's religion that inspired him. Emerson's sermons swiftly became clearer, bolder, and more personal. He declared in February 1830, "Every man makes his own religion, his own God, his own charity." The root of religion is firsthand, he said. For the truly religious person, religion is not derived "from the Bible or his neighbor." Emerson assured congregants that he did not diminish religion for, at its best, the notion of God is "the most elevated conception of character that can be formed in the mind. It is the individual's own soul carried out to perfection."⁴⁷

From here it was a short step to conceiving "salvation" as friendship, a notion Emerson developed in a series of sermons, and to write in his journal, "God in us worships God." It is irrational, he reflected, to fear reason for religious reasons. To think is to receive. Fearing reason for religious reasons amounts to fearing that the "faculties which God made can outsee God." Emerson told Second Church that God would never bring a report to Reason that contradicted God: "To reflect is to receive truth immediately from God without any medium. That is living faith." On the other hand, to base one's faith on claims of the Understanding is to kill it. Faith is not about trusting in the veracity of particular bits of knowledge: "A trust in yourself is the height not of pride but of piety, an unwillingness to learn of any but God himself. It is by yourself without ambassador that God speaks to you."⁴⁸

Emerson developed the ego-theism of the American literature anthologies while he was still a pastor. "God in us worships God" led to his famous Neoplatonist assertion, in "The Over-Soul," that the "simplest person, who in his integrity worships God, becomes God." Dutifully he delivered sermons clothed with appeals to evidence, but chafed at the demand for two-handed preaching. Sense knowledge has no bearing on genuine religion, so the evidentiary arguments were pointless, except as a concession to insecurity. Good religion projects a good God out of the self and does so without apology. Emerson had settled on that view when he resigned from Second Church in October 1832, still on friendly terms with the congregation. His beloved Ellen, a gifted poet, had died of tuberculosis in 1831. Her death devastated him, turning him back on himself. Second Church treated him gingerly, but Ellen's death eliminated Emerson's main reason for being in parish ministry. She had anchored him to the church. With her loss, his negative feelings about organized religion began to take over. Institutional religion was an oxymoron. Four months after Ellen died, Emerson wrote that the "progress of Sectarianism marks the decline of religion." Later he blasted the "sham" of organized religion, confiding to his journal that "these great religious shows" concealed an inner lack of love. Pride and ignorance fueled the Calvinist churches, while Unitarianism lived off its opposition to Calvinism: "It is cold and cheerless, the mere creature of the understanding, until controversy makes it warm with fire got from below."⁴⁹

He gave himself an exit strategy by refusing to administer the rite of the Lord's Supper. Emerson said the rite of communion violated the anti-formalist spirit of Jesus and true religion. Second Church tried to negotiate a compromise, but Emerson held to his position while acknowledging the irony. He said that forms should not matter, yet he was the one who made a fuss about the Lord's Supper. Resigning relieved him of pastoral obligations and freed him to

begin his literary career. Emerson called himself a follower of the “minister of Pure Reason,” Jesus Christ. The following year he took a nine-month tour of Europe, pledging to demonstrate “that all necessary truth is its own evidence; that no doctrine of God need appeal to a book; that Christianity is wrongly received by all such as take it for a system of doctrines.” Christianity is true as a life of moral truth: “It is a rule of life, not a rule of faith.”⁵⁰

Emerson highly esteemed his superior grasp of this insight. He met with Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Thomas Carlyle, then pronounced that all fell woefully short of himself: “They have no idea of that species of moral truth which I call the first philosophy.” They did not grasp “the extent or the harmony or the depth of their moral nature.” All were stunningly blind, at least by comparison to him. They asked him to explain his new teaching. Emerson said it was actually very old: “It is the old revelation, that perfect beauty is perfect goodness, . . . the development of the wonderful congruities of the moral law of human nature.” Every person is a law unto oneself: “He is not to live to the future as described to him, but to live to the real future by living to the real present. The highest revelation is that God is in every man.”⁵¹

Emerson was the star of American transcendentalism, but far from alone. Many aspiring Unitarian intellectuals, most of them recent Harvard students, shared his excitement at making a new religious beginning inspired by Coleridge’s romantic idealism. Emerson’s friend Frederick Henry Hedge, a Unitarian minister and son of a Harvard logic professor, declared in 1833 that the true Kantians in America were young liberals steeped in Coleridge. Harvard professors, steeped in Locke, were too simplistic to understand transcendental thinking. Hedge contended that Americans needed to stop deriding the obscurity of Coleridge and the German transcendentalists. It was possible to comprehend Kantian idealism without replicating the abstract complexity of Kant. It was also possible to take Kant’s subjective idealism too far, as Fichte did; Hedge said Schelling and Coleridge achieved the right balance. That sparked movement ambitions. Emerson lauded Hedge as “an unfolding man” whose “living leaping Logos” of an article showed the way. He loved Hedge’s superior tone, daring to talk down to Harvard professors. In 1836, Hedge, Emerson, and Unitarian minister George Ripley founded a discussion club, eventually called the Transcendental Club. It met whenever Hedge visited Boston from his congregation in Bangor, Maine—thirty times in four years. The core group counted twenty-five members, notably Amos Bronson Alcott, Orestes Brownson, William Henry Channing, James Freeman Clarke, Convers Francis, Margaret Fuller, William Henry Furness, Theodore Parker, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Sophia Ripley, and Henry David Thoreau.⁵²

The transcendentalists looked past Coleridge’s Anglican encumbrances, lauding him as the prophet of liberated self-authenticating Spirit. Fuller, a feminist literary critic who edited *The Dial* after Emerson founded it in 1839, declared of Coleridge: “To the unprepared he is nothing, to the prepared, everything.” Coleridge had said the same thing about Wordsworth’s immortality ode. Preparedness had a double meaning: only Hedge and Parker had the requisite preparation to comprehend post-Kantian idealism in German. Hedge was schooled in Kant, Fichte, and Schelling, having studied for four years in Germany; and Parker was a prodigy autodidact. The other American

transcendentalists got their German idealism through Coleridge, often with help from Carlyle, French transcendentalist Victor Cousin, or Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. Once the movement got rolling and Emerson founded the *Dial*, Hedge refused to write for it because Emersonians took license with their intuitions. American transcendentalism felt post-Christian to him, and it rushed past Kantian distinctions that mattered. From the beginning there was also a tension between the effete image of the transcendentalists and their generally democratic politics, a tension epitomized by Emerson. Brownson challenged the effete mentality from the trade-union left and was told to stop coming. Parker outflanked everyone to the political left. Hedge stuck with the group but declined the perils of association via publication. Closer to the group's center, in the 1840s Alcott, Fuller, and the Ripleys made an ill-fated attempt to establish an ideal communal society in West Roxbury, Massachusetts.⁵³

By 1838 the Unitarian Association was divided between ministers who preached old-fashioned Unitarian rationalism and ministers who threw it overboard. Channing tried to prevent a factional blowout but failed. By his lights, he had the right approach, not needing apologetic weapons, yet keeping them anyway. He loved Coleridge, who was not an Emersonian. Channing would not denigrate Norton, as the transcendentalists did, for piling up rational evidence, because biblical miracles, biblical authority, and historical probability were not to be disparaged. Emerson therefore wrote off Channing, observing in 1837: "Once Dr. Channing filled our sky. Now we become so conscious of his limits and of the difficulty attending any effort to show him our point of view, that we doubt if it be worth while. Best amputate."⁵⁴

That was a journal entry, but Emerson mined his journals constantly for lecture material and articles. In 1836 he wrote a consummately Emersonian entry that sparked excitement on the lecture circuit: "Make your own Bible." He moved to Concord, Massachusetts, after leaving Second Church, married Lydia Jackson in 1835, and had four children with her, more or less contentedly, grieving the early death of his son Waldo. Emerson made his living on the lecture circuit as the ringleader of an upstart religious and literary movement. He wrote a little-noticed book on nature and still gave supply sermons, but was more alienated than ever from church worship. It amazed him that people bothered to go to church on Sundays, usually to hear terrible sermons. Emerson sampled the preaching of Concord's new assistant pastor, Barzillai Frost, and was appalled. Frost lacked an interesting mind, droning through page after page of boring drivel. Shortly after Emerson roasted Frost in his journal, he addressed the Harvard Divinity School graduating class of 1838, seven members strong. They expected a tweak-the-establishment sermon that mildly challenged their teachers. Emerson thought that was what he delivered. What Harvard, Emerson, and the Unitarian Church got was a theological firestorm, sparked by the spirit of "best amputate."⁵⁵

Emerson began in nature-mystical mode: "In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life. The grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of flowers." This was his essential point, not a prefatory warm-up. Divinity indwells all that lives. He rushed to assure the audience that human nature bears the most profound reflection of divinity in the world. Nothing is as beautiful as a self that is open to

virtue. Emerson sang Unitarian music on this theme, but sprinkled it with anti-Christian material from his journal, deeply offending establishment Unitarians. The outrage surprised him because he had diluted his journal material—It could have been worse!—and he had lost touch.⁵⁶

He portrayed Jesus as a prophet of the “mystery of the soul” who esteemed the greatness of humanity and lived deeply in the shimmering beauty and harmony of the soul. Jesus proclaimed his own divinity, taught others to see God in him, and urged them to follow him by seeing God in themselves. This was the original gospel faith. Jesus taught and lived the religion of all-indwelling Spirit, but a dogmatizing early church reduced the divine indwelling to Jesus Christ. It denied the divine nature to everything else, turned Jesus into a god, and covered him with official titles. Emerson argued that it thereby violated the memory of Jesus and the spirit of true religion.⁵⁷

True religious feeling, he implored, is peaceable, appreciative, generous, and attractive. But historical Christianity is preoccupied with dogma and ritual. In the past, the church killed people who gave the wrong titles to Jesus; more recently, even the Unitarian church tried to convert people by appealing to miracles. Emerson said these practices are linked in the logic of bad religion: “To aim to convert a man by miracles, is a profanation of the soul. A true conversion, a true Christ, is now, as always, to be made, by the reception of beautiful sentiments.” True religion is beautifully self-authenticating and open to new revelation. Historical Christianity, by contrast, is a closed book. He dipped into his journal to illustrate the ugliness of historical Christianity. Barzillai Frost, though unnamed, took a dreadful pounding, as Emerson recycled entire paragraphs from his journal blasting lifeless, pitiful preaching, a typical specimen of stupid church dogmatism.⁵⁸

He ended in the only way that he could, urging the young ministers to go off on their own and think their own thoughts. Imitation, Emerson warned, cannot transcend its model. The imitator is doomed to mediocrity. Instead of regarding themselves as caretakers or followers of a tradition, and instead of giving themselves overmuch to pastoral tasks, they were better advised to cultivate their individual souls: “Yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost—cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity.” The remedy to bad religion was “first, soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul.”⁵⁹

The guardians of mainstream Unitarianism were embarrassed and offended by Emerson’s address. They said there was such a thing as Unitarian Christian orthodoxy, to which Emerson did not belong. They tried to say it as politely as possible; New England Unitarians prized their reputation for decorum. Young Theodore Parker, a recent graduate of Harvard Divinity School, had a very different reaction. Parker enthused in his journal, “My soul is roused. . . . So beautiful, so just, so true, and terribly sublime was his picture of the faults of the church in its present position.” He wrote to a friend that Emerson’s address, though slightly exaggerated and offering “some philosophical untruths,” was nonetheless “the noblest, the most inspiring strain I ever listened to.” For the rest of his years, Parker described it as the turning point of his life.⁶⁰

Theodore Parker was a voracious autodidact of immense moral courage. The eleventh child of a Lexington farmer, he lost his mother and six siblings to tuberculosis, enrolled at Harvard College in 1830, and could not pay for classes,

so he joined his classmates only for exams, which he passed. Classmates found him rough, raw, emotional, poetic, volatile, and brilliant. He toiled as a farmer, carpenter, and teacher during college, enrolling at Harvard Divinity School in 1834. There he added to his list of languages, reading twenty by his graduation in 1836, in addition to reading German theologians and Coleridge on his own. His first congregation was a small Unitarian church in West Roxbury, which he chose mainly for its proximity to Boston libraries. Parker had an unhappy childless marriage to Lydia Dodge Cabot Parker since he was too driven to be a good partner. He wanted to keep his standing in the Unitarian Association and to teach at Harvard Divinity School, two related goals conflicting with his attraction to Schleiermacher, Coleridge, and Emerson. Parker's early puzzlement over how liberal he dared to go fixed on the issue of biblical authority. Since the Bible contains no great religious or moral truth exclusively, how can it be divinely inspired?⁶¹

As a divinity student, Parker wrote articles reflecting this puzzlement, sometimes taking conservative positions. He wondered how much freedom his church, and Harvard, would allow. Emerson's Divinity School address inspired Parker to find the answer. The controversy over it convinced Parker that Unitarianism had already broken into a progressive party and a stodgy establishment party. The former stood for progress, and the latter chose standing still. Parker believed that Channing was the true leader of the progressive party, albeit conflicted about leading it, and the conservatives had no leader; inertia was their strength. In 1839 he attended the annual Berry Street Conference and shook his head as Unitarian ministers debated whether they should exclude from Christian fellowship those who denied the importance of the biblical miracles. That night Parker raged in his journal: "This is the 19th century! This is Boston! This among the Unitarians!" He was incredulous, also determined: "I intend, in the coming year, to let out all the force of Transcendentalism that is in me. Come what will come, I will let off the Truth fast as it comes."⁶²

He began by reviewing a notorious book, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, by David Friedrich Strauss. The first edition, in 1835, had ended Strauss's academic career in Germany before it began. Four years later, the fourth edition was about to be published. Strauss had aimed to clear the ground for his left-Hegelian theology, but his idea of clearing the ground was to demolish the historical credibility of the Gospel narratives. Parker was probably his first American reader. He stewed over the book for years, argued with it, and measured his beliefs against it. In 1839 he praised Strauss effusively, with two crucial caveats. Parker said *Life of Jesus* towered above its field; it was the most important theological book of the past 150 years. But it dismissed too much of the New Testament as mythical and was not a great theological work because it lacked a religious spirit. Great works of theology have rigorous scholarship *and* a religious spirit. Parker believed that Strauss possessed a truly religious spirit; unfortunately, his book didn't show it: "It is colder than ice. It is the most melancholy book we ever read." Parker was setting a high standard for himself. The liberal theology that was needed would blend the religious spirit of Schleiermacher with the critical rigor of Strauss.⁶³

Once Emerson set him free, Parker always said exactly what he believed, taking pride in having no tact or a filter. Invited to preach at an ordination service,

he scandalized an ecumenical gathering by expounding what he did not believe. He did not believe that true Christianity is bound to any doctrinal claims about the authority of Christ or the Bible. It puzzled and annoyed him that his clerical colleagues held personal beliefs that they discussed freely among themselves but never mentioned in public. To Parker, the sermon was the ideal forum for proclaiming what he really believed. He announced that modern criticism was “breaking to pieces” the idols of Christology and biblical authority. Modern criticism showed that the biblical writers sometimes made bad arguments, used faulty data, uttered mistaken predictions, and recycled the myths of their time.⁶⁴

The true religion is *in* Christianity, Parker said, but it is not bound up with miracles, divine titles, the history of Israel, or biblical authority: “If Jesus had taught at Athens, and not at Jerusalem; if he had wrought no miracle, and none but the human nature had ever been ascribed to him; if the Old Testament had forever perished at his birth—Christianity would still have been the Word of God; it would have lost none of its truths. It would be just as true, just as beautiful, just as lasting, as now it is.” Christianity does not rest even on the personal authority of Christ. Jesus was the exemplar of a religious ideal, but what matters is the truth of the ideal, not the history of Jesus. Parker pressed this claim to its logical conclusion. Even if historical criticism were to prove that the Gospels are total fabrications and Jesus never lived, the truth of Christianity would not be affected. No true doctrine is refuted historically: if it is true, it stands by itself. The only permanent religious truths are life-giving moral intuitions.⁶⁵

This sermon sparked a public controversy that embarrassed Unitarian leaders. For twenty years they endured the accusation that Unitarianism was a “halfway house to infidelity.” Now they were challenged to prove the epithet wrong. Would they break fellowship with Parker and condemn his heresies? Most had mixed feelings about Parker, respecting his intelligence and moral character, finding him difficult company, and greatly disliking his sermon. They responded by cutting him off from the privileges of ministerial fellowship, refusing to exchange pulpits with him. Some refused to speak to him. Like Emerson, Parker had dismissed traditional Christian teaching in an ecumenical setting, expounding his personal viewpoint on an occasion that called him to speak for the common mind of the church. But his address was more radical and church-oriented than Emerson’s, which was problematic for Unitarianism on both counts. Parker used his knowledge of biblical criticism to negate scriptural claims that Emerson left alone; otherwise he adhered more closely than Emerson to the style and usual claims of Unitarianism. Did he represent the future of American Unitarianism? Was he far enough outside the mainstream to be expelled?

In the winter of 1841–42, cut off from his colleagues in the Boston Association, Parker lectured at Boston’s old Masonic Temple. The lectures were a huge success, as hundreds of students walked in from Cambridge each week to fill the 750-seat temple. The book version was titled *Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion*; meanwhile Parker wore down. He needed a break from sermon writing, but his colleagues refused to exchange pulpits with him. He told Watertown pastor Convers Francis, just before Francis joined the Harvard Divinity faculty, that if he stayed in West Roxbury he would have to write 104 sermons per year for 104 people. “This will consume most of my energies, and

I shall be in substance *put down*—a bull whose roaring can't be stopped, but who is tied up in the corner of the barn-cellar, so that *nobody hears him*; and it is the same as if he did not roar, or as if he were muzzled. *Now this I will not do.*"⁶⁶

Discourse ensured that Parker would not be silenced, which moved the Boston Association of Ministers to settle the question of his Unitarian status. Old Guard leader Nathaniel L. Frothingham declared that Parker forfeited his right to ministerial fellowship by denigrating Christianity. Others resented Parker for revealing that their private views were more liberal than their pulpit sermons. Parker replied that he never accused anyone of hypocrisy by name. As for heresy, he asked for the "precise quiddity" that must be added to absolute religion, the ideal religion, for it to qualify as Christianity. There were three logical possibilities about the relation of Christianity to absolute religion: Christianity is less than absolute religion; Christianity is equal to absolute religion; or Christianity is absolute religion and something more. He assumed that no Unitarian minister took the first option; Parker's position was number two; apparently they held out for number three. But Unitarianism lacked a creedal standard of orthodoxy, so how did these guardians of Unitarian orthodoxy establish the precise "more" that elevated absolute religion to Christianity?⁶⁷

The ministers couldn't win if they let Parker frame the issue, so they cut to the chase: Parker had to resign from their fellowship. Parker replied that they would have to expel him to get rid of him. He had them figured: Unitarians were shunners, not excommunicators. The meeting dragged on for three hours before taking a bathetic turn. Cyrus Bartol spoke warmly about Parker's moral integrity and goodwill, which prompted others to assure that they, too, had never doubted his personal character. Parker burst into tears and ran from the room. He could take criticism, but not mixed with tender sentiments. The first Unitarian heresy trial was over.

Upon vowing to unleash his truth, Parker laid out an ambitious intellectual agenda. He wanted to make a high-powered case for a liberal approach to religion and Christianity. American Christianity had nothing like the writings of Schleiermacher, Strauss, or biblical scholar Wilhelm de Wette. These were his models. In 1840, Parker vowed to raise American theology to the standard of German theology: "I must do or die. I sit down to hard work, and then only do I feel free from this tormenting spirit; at other times I am consumed by self-reproach for the nothings I have accomplished, for the nothing I have undertaken." He said his heart pounded audibly and his hand quivered when he sat down to write. He felt some relief from this pressure when he wrote something scholarly, but the feeling never lasted. To live with himself, he had to raise the level of American theological scholarship. He began by producing an English edition of de Wette's critical study of the Hebrew Bible, resolving to write books of his own on the Christian Testament, philosophy of religion, and theology.⁶⁸

But Parker's constant lecturing and social activism pulled him out of the study. In the 1840s he gave himself completely to the cause of abolition, putting his intellectual goals on hold. His collected speeches, sermons, and articles ran fifteen volumes, but he never found time for the major works he planned. After he threw himself into the abolition struggle, Parker said he would write the big books when slavery was abolished. He was especially keen to write about world religions. As it was, *Discourse* turned out to be his major work,

accomplishing his objective more than he felt. No American had written anything like it. The book was steeped in Kant and Schleiermacher, but every sentence was lucid American English. It originated as public lectures but raised the standard of American theology. Parker died too soon to deal with Darwinian theory, he was too rationalistic to appreciate or acknowledge that religious language is symbolic and metaphorical, and his transcendentalist rationalism was anti-historical in ways he never fathomed. His version of liberal theology soon acquired a musty impression on these counts. But he was the first American to aim for the Schleiermacher role.⁶⁹

Discourse declared that American theology was “full of confusion.” Instead of making truth their authority, theologians took authority for truth. The best thinkers were tarred as infidels and atheists; meanwhile, believers reduced Christianity to idolatry, venerating the Bible and Jesus as idols, failing the test of rationality. Parker proposed to move “from the transient Form to the eternal Substance; from outward and false Belief to real and Inward Life; from this partial Theology and its Idols of human device, to that universal Religion and its ever living Infinite God.” He employed a post-Kantian rendering of Kantian idealism without explaining what that meant and cribbed his proof of the religious instinct in humanity from Schleiermacher.⁷⁰

Parker rendered Kant’s idealism in customary American transcendentalist fashion, spiritualizing Kant’s categories of understanding as innate ideas. *Discourse* averted the finer points, but Parker explained elsewhere that Kant “gave me the true method, and put me on the right road.” Transcendentalism was the right method, Parker said. The mind creates primal intuitions that are facts of consciousness, three of which are the “great primal instincts of mankind” underlying all religions. The instinctive intuition of the divine creates consciousness of divine reality. The instinctive intuition of moral right creates consciousness of a moral law that transcends human will. The intuition of immortality assures the continuity of individuality. True religious thinking, Parker argued, holds fast to these three essential truths. His life and thinking were based on these instincts that are spontaneously given to all.⁷¹

That was not very good Kantianism, but it perfectly summarized what Parker took from post-Kantian idealism. In *Discourse*, he described the religious instinct variously as a germ, a fact of nature, a principle, a faculty, an intuition, and an instinct, without explaining how it differed from other intuitive truths. He said that our knowledge of God’s existence requires “no argument whatsoever” because it is an intuition of Reason, not a verdict of reasoning. Parker was fully Emersonian in relying on intuition, adding to it the certainty of immortality. The idea of God is revealed to consciousness by intuition, categorically apart from sense experience. It does not depend upon a posteriori arguments about the order of the world or upon a priori arguments about the spiritual nature of reality. It needs no arguments at all. Still, Parker could not rest with the transcendental assurance that the idea of God is an innate truism like liberty or immortality. Pure intuitionism was too purely subjective for him. Parker invoked Schleiermacher on religious feeling, but he never spoke of religion as absolute dependence. He invoked the distinction between Reason and Understanding, but gave a higher creative role to the Understanding than Coleridge and Emerson.⁷²

Emerson and Parker replayed the argument, in their fashion, between subjective and objective idealism. Emerson conceived intuitional truths as subjective insights of an individual soul; Parker conceived intuitional truths as universal elements or principles of human consciousness. Emerson said it is vulgar to make an argument establishing or defending a spiritual truth. His truths were self-authenticating, like the beauty of a rose. Parker, an every-week activist seeking to persuade large gatherings, used every shred of evidence he could find. He loaded his speeches with statistics, historical comparisons, and philosophical proofs. Parker argued that the Understanding performs a creative function in formulating concepts and delivering them to Reason. It is not a mere reasoning machine, contrary to Emerson. The Understanding formulates, creatively interprets, and supplies to Reason the concepts upon which Reason makes its judgments. Parker had actually read Kant's critiques, so he grasped the importance of the faculty of judgment. The ideas of Reason are not pure intuitions. They are judgments emerging from the deliberative interaction of the Understanding and Reason. Parker reasoned that the Understanding must be educated to perform its interpretive functions. It relies upon external data delivered by sense experience; thus Reason relies on sense experience.⁷³

Emersonian idealism, though purer in its subjective form, was hard to sustain if one lacked Emerson's readiness to wave off criticism. To Emerson, transcendentalism was a way to get around historical consciousness, even as he claimed to take historical criticism seriously. It didn't matter if the gospel story is made up because he had true religion. Parker loved transcendentalism for the same reason, even making the same argument about the gospel story. But he could not wave off arguments about historical probabilities in Emerson's fashion. The ongoing controversy over the legacies of Hegel, Schleiermacher, and Strauss riveted Parker's attention. Strauss had wrecked his career by trying to destroy historical Christianity. He tried to regain academic favor by revising his book, moving in Schleiermacher's direction, but that didn't fool anyone. So, in his fourth edition, Strauss restored the cutting and smashing of the original edition and relinquished his dream of an academic career. Parker got his bearings from the Straussian controversy. Strauss made wholesale negative verdicts, but Parker's were piecemeal. Strauss tried to appropriate Schleiermacher, but nobody believed him; he had already ruined his religious reputation. Strauss said Christianity is true as a mythical anticipation of the Hegelian idea of divine-human unity. Parker choked on Hegel's dialectical reconstruction of Christian doctrine, especially the Trinity.⁷⁴

Parker believed that Jesus knew God intimately and that Jesus was the greatest moral exemplar of how we should live. This was all that needed to be said about Jesus. He accepted many of Strauss's judgments: miracle stories are out, the Gospel narratives often conflict, and the Fourth Gospel has almost no historical value. Parker described the Hebrew background to Christianity as a reverse image of enlightenment: primitive, provincial, dogmatic, vindictive. Out of this dreary background, a teacher of true religion somehow emerged. Parker said that Jesus taught, or at least implied, the two great themes of Absolute Religion: divine goodness and the spiritual nature of humanity. However, Jesus shared some of the worst attributes of his culture: "It is vain to deny, or

attempt to conceal, the errors in his doctrine—a revengeful God, a Devil absolutely evil, an eternal Hell, a speedy end of the world.⁷⁵

Parts of *Discourse* took on the atmosphere of a shooting gallery. Parker warned that to make Christianity stand or fall by the authority of Jesus is to make it look ridiculous: “If Religion or Christianity rest on his authority, and that alone, it falls when the foundation falls, and that stands at the mercy of a school-boy.” It was time to sweep away all religious authorities save the authority of reason and spiritual intuition, completing the Reformation. Jesus, at his best, fell back on the goodness of God and taught that the truth is its own authority. The early church fell back on the authority of Jesus. The later church fell back on the authority of the Bible. Still later, the church made itself an authority. The Reformation arrested this degenerative layering of authorities. Protestantism overthrew the tyranny of the church and exalted the authority of the Bible. Three centuries later, biblical criticism overthrew the authority of the Bible and exalted the authority of Jesus. The future belonged to genuinely liberal Christianity, which negated all external authorities and restored the authority of the divine indwelling.⁷⁶

Parker addressed the special role of the Unitarians. He grieved at the situation in his church, yet he believed that Unitarianism was the only American denomination remotely close to absolute religion. Unfortunately, Unitarianism was not progressing. It began as reasons for not believing—as Norton famously put it—in the Trinity, total depravity, substitutionary atonement, eternal punishment, and a revengeful God. Its leaders were reformist, mannered, and devoted to the Bible. They believed that a moderately liberalized Christianity was a sustainable third way between Protestant orthodoxy and anti-Christian rationalism. Parker believed that a serious third way still did not exist. Unitarianism was a halfway house to somewhere, but its progress had stopped. It was stuck in the contradictions of moderately liberalized Christianity. It upheld the vestiges of supernaturalism without the supernatural. It humanized the Bible yet tried to salvage biblical miracles. It believed in humanity’s spiritual nature yet asked for a Mediator and Redeemer. It criticized the traditionalism of other churches but mourned over things past and gone. By struggling to keep its old crutches, the Unitarian movement failed to keep its faith.⁷⁷

A Discourse warned that Unitarianism stood in danger of losing its status as America’s best religious hope. In his later career, Parker judged that Unitarianism was hopelessly mired in its contradictions, denying the divinity of Christ without affirming the humanity of Christ. Thus it stood merely for the development of a negation. Most Unitarian leaders, being cultivated New Englanders, were not very religious. This deficiency of spiritual feeling made Unitarianism unattractive to ordinary Christians. Parker said it also made Unitarianism mediocre, uninterested in absolute religion. Unitarian leaders settled for the machinery of a boring culture religion. He put it sharply: “They are not now making any advances towards a liberal theology. They stand still, and become more and more narrow and bigoted from year to year.”⁷⁸

This verdict reflected Parker’s bitter regret that precious few abolitionists were Unitarians. He gave his best years to the one cause that most Americans found more offensive than apostasy. Parker scathingly declared that the only

doctrine as popular as hell in American Christianity was slavery. Clerics who opposed slavery in respectable, decorous ways were worthless, and even the abolitionist movement of the 1830s and 1840s was mostly pacifist and anti-political. A cultural chasm separated respectable critics from the abolitionists, who were treated as scum. Parker knew the difference from being a lonely abolitionist cleric. In the 1840s he allied with Adin Ballou and other advocates of Christian pacifist abolitionism, but the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 drove Parker into the militant abolitionist camp that forcibly resisted bounty hunters and later supported John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry. Parker grieved that not a single denomination belonged to the abolitionist movement, pacifist or otherwise: "The land is full of ministers, respectable men, educated men—are they opposed to slavery? I do not know a single man, eminent in any sect, who is also eminent in his opposition to slavery." The only exception paid a cautionary price: "There was one such man, Dr. Channing; but just as he became eminent in the cause of freedom, he lost power in his own church, lost caste in his own little sect; and though men are now glad to make sectarian capital out of his reputation after he is dead, when he lived, they cursed him by their gods!"⁷⁹

Channing turned radical at the end, which turned Federal Street Church against him. His hatred of tyranny was the animating core of his politics. Channing supported democracy to the extent, and on the condition, that it strengthened the rights of individuals. In the 1820s he believed that Federal Street congregants agreed with him. He held them spellbound every Sunday, perhaps idolizing him too much, so how was he to think otherwise? In 1830 he took a health-seeking vacation to St. Croix in the West Indies and reencountered the horror of slavery. He made a vow, returned to Boston, preached a passionate sermon against the degrading evil of slavery, and subscribed to William Lloyd Garrison's new Boston newspaper, *The Liberator*.

Garrison had just begun to organize an abolitionist movement. It was pacifist and anti-political, but also radical in Garrison's fashion, vehemently condemning slavers and demanding immediate abolition. To Channing, it was impossibly rough, confrontational, vitriolic, poorly educated, and self-righteous. This was not the antislavery movement he had imagined or could join. Channing put off the leading Unitarian abolitionist minister, Samuel May, who implored him to join the movement. Another leading Unitarian abolitionist, Lydia Maria Child, a prolific writer and the younger sister of Convers Francis, wrote a powerful book in 1833, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*. It made a case for immediate emancipation without compensation to slavers, stressing that Blacks and Whites were intellectual equals. Channing read it with a guilty conscience since Child wrote what he himself had planned to say, until his qualms about shrill abolitionists silenced him. Meanwhile Child organized antislavery societies in New England. In 1834 Channing was still moaning about abolitionist vengeance when May cut him off: he couldn't bear it anymore. May chastised Channing for standing aside while human beings were viciously brutalized and deprived of human dignity. How dare he look down on crude abolitionists! How could it be their fault that he stood by in silence? Channing was struck to his core. He apologized to May and vowed to speak out.⁸⁰

He spoke out powerfully. Channing's pamphlet of 1835, *Slavery*, implored that slavery violated every right that inheres in being a child of God, and did

so “necessarily, systematically, from its nature.” Into every human being, “God has breathed an immortal spirit, more precious than the whole outward creation. No earthly or celestial language can exaggerate the worth of a human being.” Therefore, Channing said, Christianity is necessarily universalistic, respecting the rights of all human beings. To claim that some possess more rights than others is to violate God’s law and universal presence: “He who cannot see a brother, a child of God, a man possessing all the rights of humanity, under a skin darker than his own, wants the vision of a Christian. He worships the outward. The spirit is not yet revealed to him.”⁸¹

This radical turn shocked New England, evoking infuriated editorials across the nation. Channing was the first eminence from polite society to join the cause of antislavery emancipation. He caught the wrath of friends and congregants who had admired him for decades. John Quincy Adams, six years past his term as US president, was a friend of Channing’s and increasingly a voice of antislavery conscience in the US House of Representatives, but Adams condemned Channing’s pamphlet as “an inflammatory if not incendiary publication.” Boston’s proslavery riots of 1835 escalated the furor against Channing. Lay leaders of Federal Street Church were appalled and disgusted that he described abolitionism as a religious cause. Channing spoke at protest meetings on slavery, women’s rights, tariff policy, property redistribution, and temperance. He opposed capital punishment, supported immediate suffrage reforms, and advocated universal suffrage as a long-range goal. Channing opposed Federalist protectionism in the face of fiercely protectionist sentiment in Massachusetts. He spoke repeatedly against slavery in the USA and West Indies, telling English Unitarian Harriet Martineau that he was increasingly willing to associate with abolitionists. To antislavery journalist James G. Birney, Channing lauded the abolitionists as indispensable freedom fighters before lamenting that they were still too condemnatory and self-righteous. Channing opposed the annexation of Texas as a triumph for slavery and empire, and he protested the murder of Elijah Lovejoy by an Alton, Illinois, proslavery mob. In 1840 he addressed Garrison’s fabled Convention of Friends of Universal Reform, which Emerson described as “Madmen, madwomen, men with beards, Dunkers, Muggletonians, Come-outers, Groaners, Agrarians, Seventh-Day Baptists, Quakers, Abolitionists, Calvinists, Unitarians, and Philosophers.”⁸²

Emerson marveled at seeing Channing in such company. Federal Street Church became a zone of hostility for Channing. His once-adoring congregants insulted him in the street. Channing claimed it rolled off him, but he was deeply hurt and even mortified at wondering what he had accomplished at Federal Street. All those years of sublime sermons yielded this result? The congregation delivered its crowning insult in 1840 by refusing to permit a funeral for his cherished friend, antislavery activist Charles Follen. Channing retreated to his farm in Rhode Island, remaining the nominal pastor, but only rarely preached at Federal Street again. He was done with feeling loathed. At the same time, he never bonded with Garrison because they clashed over sensibility and abolition. Garrison burned with righteous impatience, his language was harsh and self-dramatizing, and he condemned his enemies as a class. Channing avoided conflict as much as conscience allowed, made decisions slowly, and refused to condemn all slaveholders, judging that many were probably just normally

sinful and that slavery could not be abolished in one stroke. These positions enraged Garrison, believing that Channing undermined the cause—exactly what Channing believed about Garrison. Each was right about the other, and both shared the naive belief that only moral suasion would abolish slavery.⁸³

Channing yearned for a liberation movement that did not demonize its opponents or insist on its own purity. Parker preached that way on Sundays but did not allow church morality to hold him back. In 1845 he organized a free-church congregation at the spacious Melodeon Hall in Boston, which they outgrew, so he moved to the Music Hall, seating three thousand. On Mondays he hit the lecture circuit, giving a hundred speeches per year on behalf of abolition, women's rights, labor organizing, temperance, education reform, and self-government. Parker opposed the Mexican War and the annexation of Texas; he passionately believed in democratic self-government and famously implored the New England Anti-Slavery Convention of 1850 to demand a government "of all the people, by all the people, and for all the people," a phrase that President Lincoln shortened at Gettysburg in 1863.⁸⁴

When the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 passed, Parker bitterly concluded that American slavery would need to be smashed by armed force; its evil was too institutionalized in American life to be amenable to moral or political reforms alone. He and May organized resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law, agitated for the forceful dismantling of slavery, and supported uprisings by enslaved people. Unitarian leaders contended that fighting a war to abolish slavery would be a terrible evil because war is a political instrument, not a moral action. It followed that war can be justified only by a political motive, not a moral one. Parker pleaded the transcendent evil of condemning human beings to slavery. The obligation to destroy slavery burned in him, consuming his later life. He destroyed his health in his frenetic campaigning and died at the age of forty-nine, in 1860, shortly before America went to war with itself.⁸⁵

In his lifetime, Parker's religious views were eclipsed by his notoriety as a radical abolitionist and infidel. He was known mostly for what he rejected. He said he would rather write Emersonian essays on the soul or a book on world religious history, but oppression and suffering called him to the work of criticism, negation, confrontation, and social struggle. He preached and lectured to the largest throngs in New England, but was alienated from his denomination, spurned as unbearable by respectable society. He found most of his audience outside the Unitarian communion. Even Parker's Sunday congregation was basically an audience, not a religious community, which gathered to hear him speak on religion, history, literature, and current events. Members came and went during the service, many wore casual clothes and read newspapers, and some departed early to avoid being seen at his church.

At his death he seemed to belong only to the social causes for which he spoke and a scattered audience of religious individualists, many of them outside the Unitarian fold. After the Civil War, however, Parker became a figure of Unitarian pride and emulation. The reputational resurrection that he attributed to Channing happened to him, only more dramatically. Channing was never widely reviled. In the mid-1860s, Americans began to repent for having reviled Parker. The abolition of American slavery made his abolitionism seem admirable in retrospect. The entry of his followers into Unitarian pulpits accelerated

the generational absorption of Emersonian religion into the mainstream of the Unitarian church.

The question whether Unitarianism should retain the Christian name, or at least its right to claim it, became a defining issue after the Civil War. The original American transcendentalist, Hedge, implored Unitarians not to forsake their Christian identity. Hedge, in 1864, believed there was still time to dissuade the Unitarian Fellowship from discarding Christianity. The pertinent choice, he said, was not between a corrupt historical religion and a pure religion of spirit, for all religious perspectives are historically embedded, and transcendentalism is not a universal intuition of the soul. American transcendentalism was a particular form of religious thought, bearing its own history and blinders, like every other perspective. To Hedge, the challenge was to incorporate transcendentalism into a progressive and open religion that did not discard its Christian basis. There was no good reason to abandon progressive Unitarian Christianity; Hedge did not want to end up in a tiny humanist sect that attracted only the culturally like-minded. Even if Parker's followers took over a few cathedrals, they were not likely to build many of their own. Disavowing Christianity would only make Unitarianism weaker.⁸⁶

The logic of Emerson-Parker transcendentalism was post-Christian, just as Hedge had long feared. Parker transcendentalism was the last stop within Unitarian Christianity. In Parker's time it was a marginal position in Unitarianism. Afterward his followers plausibly said that Parker would have relinquished the Christian name had he lived beyond the Civil War. Hedge and New York minister Henry W. Bellows tried to retain the Christian identity of Unitarianism, but the Free Religion successors of Parker were equally outspoken and determined, plus stocked with distinguished names: Francis Ellingwood Abbott, Amos Bronson Alcott, Cyrus Bartol, Lydia Maria Child, Octavius Brooks Frothingham, William Lloyd Garrison, Lucretia Mott, William J. Potter, Gerrit Smith, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, John Weiss, and Emerson. Unitarians muddled through an interim period in which Bellows rallied Unitarian Christians and the Free Religion humanists called for a come-out new religion. The Unitarian future belonged to post-Christian religious humanists who claimed Emerson and Parker for a global religious syncretism, or later, scientific humanism. After Unitarians opted for scientific humanism, the transcendental philosophy of Parker and Emerson became passé, as did Parker's commitment to a theology of world religions.⁸⁷

With precious few exceptions, the transcendentalists were true believers in their Anglo-Saxon superiority, which tainted their antislavery activism with a patronizing White supremacism and made them shabby and silent concerning the rights of Native Americans. Parker epitomized these conceits, contending that White Euro-American civilization was incomparably superior to all others and that Black Americans belonged to an inferior race. Though Parker burned with infuriated shame at American slavery, he told audiences that Caucasians were the most advanced race in the world, Teutons were the most advanced among the Caucasians, Anglo-Saxons were the most advanced of the Teutons, and the greatest Anglo-Saxons ran New England. On Parker's telling, New England Anglo-Saxons raised the bar on what enlightened civilization looks like, fulfilling the Puritan dream of a savior nation, a Republic of Liberty. He

could be florid on this topic, describing America as a virgin impregnated by a freedom-seeking people and married to humankind. Parker followed through on the virgin metaphor by brushing aside the rights and oppression of Native Americans. Almost no transcendentalist raised a voice of protest while White Americans stole Native American lands, waged genocidal violence against First Nation tribes, and abrogated every treaty standing in the way of "Manifest Destiny."⁸⁸

Amos Bronson Alcott wrote paeans to westward expansion that erased Native Americans as a topic of consideration. Convers Francis said it was "a law of human progress that civilized man must overtop and displace uncivilized man." Fuller and Thoreau were interested in Native Americans and sad for them but did not advocate for them. Parker and Emerson rarely said a word about the political, territorial, and religious sovereignty of Native Americans, or their violent displacement. The expulsion of the Cherokees from their ancestral lands in Georgia evoked a brief exception, partly because the Cherokees had tried so hard to assimilate. In his Thanksgiving Sermon of 1838, Parker condemned the ethnic cleansing of Cherokee Nation, declaring that he "cast no blame" against anyone, but "the blood of the Red Man cries out to Heaven. . . . Is there not a sin of the deepest dye committed against these poor sons of the Forest?" Emerson was briefly stirred to similar anguish. In 1832 he had admired the eloquence of two Cherokee speakers in Boston, John Ridge and Elias Boudinot, which confirmed the Noble Savage projection to which Emerson was prone. He loved artful speaking, appreciating that at least two Cherokees were capable of it. In April 1838 Emerson wrote a plaintive letter to President Martin Van Buren, asking if the Trail of Tears was really necessary; then he returned to looking away: "I can do nothing. Why shriek? Why strike ineffectual blows?"⁸⁹

That was typical; the transcendentalists were capable of sympathy, but risking something for Native Americans politically was out of play. It was one thing to speak against the barbarity of slavery, a terrible blot on the redeemer nation, but advocating for those who stood in the way of American conquest was too much. The only steadfast exception—unless one counts abolitionist icon Wendell Phillips as a transcendentalist—was Child, who wrote pamphlets on Native American rights through the 1860s and blasted US Army General Philip Sheridan in 1870 for massacring Blackfeet women. Child observed that Sheridan conducted no such slaughters of Confederate women and babies during the Civil War because they were White. But the "Friends of the Indian" movement to which Child belonged did not respect Native Americans either. The Indian Appropriations Act of 1871 abolished the individual sovereignty of all native tribes, turning thousands of indigenous cultures into a single "Indian problem." Reformers said the solution was to abolish the indigenous cultures. In 1887 they pushed through the spectacularly disastrous Dawes Act, which broke up tribal lands, removed vast lands from tribal control, turned Native Americans into individualized farmers, and destroyed cultural traditions of the Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Seminoles—the so-called Five Civilized Tribes. The tribes vehemently pleaded against losing their lands, to no avail. Their "friends" believed that Native Americans were overdue to assimilate with their conquerors.⁹⁰

Enlightened progress could not proceed if native peoples and premodern anything stood in the way. Parker denigrated all historical religions, reserving the usual Enlightenment scorn for Judaism in particular. Religious symbolism, metaphor, myth, and liturgy held nothing for him. Only literal propositions were real to him, he universalized the ones he believed, and he never tired of insisting that every statement in the Bible has only one correct meaning. In 1882, Harvard Unitarian theologian Joseph Henry Allen aptly observed that Parker, though a Unitarian giant, could not be a model for Unitarians because he was unceasingly partisan, aggressive, and polemical, constantly looking for a fight. Allen said theology had to become more empirical and judicious if it was to have a future in a scientific culture; he was already finding it hard to explain Parker and his world to Harvard students.⁹¹

Unitarianism started on a post-Christian path just as liberal theology and the social gospel became a movement in other Protestant denominations. To the social gospel liberals who gained control of Yale, Chicago, Boston University, and Union Theological Seminary, the post-Christian trajectory of Unitarianism was a cautionary specter. Unitarians had rested too much on their negotiations. The job of liberal theology was to liberalize the churches without fighting about it, and to channel their idealism into social-justice causes, eventually dubbed the social gospel.

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