

# A passion for progress

by [Robert Bruce Mullin](#) in the [July 31, 2002](#) issue

Though defenders of conservative evangelicalism, neo-orthodoxy and radical theology agree on very little, all would gladly dance on the grave of 19th-century liberal Protestantism. Nineteenth-century liberalism conjures up images of earnest progressive clergy ministering to elite congregations, all trying to be thoroughly up to date while missing the real thrust of their era. In this, the first volume of a projected three-volume, comprehensive history of American theological liberalism, Gary Dorrien sets out to present these 19th-century generations anew, showing both their strengths and weaknesses. Combining theological analysis with historical and biographical detail, Dorrien, professor of theology at Kalamazoo College in Michigan, strives to make the figures and ideas of this era arresting to modern readers.

The liberal theological impulse was (and is) for Dorrien a middle way. It was an attempt to establish a real Christianity without relying on external authorities--a Christianity that could avoid (to use language favored by some Victorians) both orthodoxy and "infidelism." The story is well known to students of American religious history, having been surveyed most notably by William Hutchison in *The Modernist Impulse and American Protestantism* (still the classic work). But Dorrien stresses two factors not emphasized by earlier writers: that American theological liberalism is native, not something imported from Europe, and that it is deeply rooted in the pulpit.

The main contour of his narrative is not radically different from the contour of earlier histories. He begins with the Unitarians and William Ellery Channing, and then moves to the Transcendentalists and Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker. Next come Horace Bushnell, Henry Ward Beecher, the Andover School, and the end of the century academics like Charles A. Briggs and Borden P. Bowne. But Dorrien has contextualized the theology far more than earlier students have. Thus we see Parker as an abolitionist as well as a radical Unitarian, Beecher in scandal as well as in the pulpit, and Bushnell as a traditional (and for Dorrien by no means sympathetic) social thinker as well as a theologian.

In many places Dorrien's study succeeds admirably. He is particularly helpful with the generation of preachers and teachers associated with the *Andover Review*. Often overlooked because of their modest stature as individual thinkers, they provide a crucial conduit for American liberalism and illustrate the idea that the movement flowed from the pulpit. Newman Smyth is rightfully lifted up as an important thinker, and even Theodore Thornton Munger is presented as the author of "audaciously presumptuous claims with modest disclaimers." Dorrien's treatments of Parker and Charles Briggs are similarly helpful. Less successful are his unnuanced discussion of the Unitarian-Transcendentalist controversy and his assessments of Bushnell.

Two larger questions emerge from the narrative, the first concerning the narrative's unity. In a story of transience and permanence, what constitutes the permanence? Dorrien perhaps puts too much weight on the role of Schleiermacher, who pops up again and again in the narrative, often under the guise of the "mediating" theologian. But here historical specificity crimps the grand narrative. Very little of Schleiermacher's work was available in English before mid-19th century, and knowledge of him among non-German-speaking Protestants is easily overestimated. Dorrien asserts that mediating theologians such as Carl Ulmann and Isaak Dorner in fact conveyed Schleiermacher to an English-speaking audience. But would contemporary students actually have identified this mediating theology with Schleiermacher? And to what degree would modern Schleiermacher scholars recognize their subject in these 19th-century sources?

A second question is the place of theology in all of this. To be sure, there is a massive amount of theological discussion here, but in Dorrien's attempt to contextualize and make his story relevant, the historical sometimes overshadows the theological. The addition of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and women's rights to the story of Henry Ward Beecher is justifiable, and the discussion of the connection between 19th-century feminism and racist ideology in the controversy over African-American suffrage is interesting, but it leads us far afield from theology.

This is especially the case with the treatment of Bushnell. "He is the person in this narrative I find most repugnant on issues pertaining to ethnicity, gender and cultural politics," Dorrien states. Such a position is fair, but it has its consequences. The subtleties of Bushnell's treatment of the atonement and other doctrinal topics are lost in its wake. Indeed, the narrative as a whole takes on most of its energy when the discussion shifts from theology to broader political and cultural questions. It may be a comment on the later history of American theological liberalism that at key

places politics and not theology is this book's governing passion.

These caveats aside, this is a solid work of great scope. *The Making of American Liberal Theology* successfully presents the story of the emergence of American liberalism to a new generation of readers, and will ultimately connect this 19th-century story to the great themes of the 20th century.