

# Religion of Democracy



Religion of Democracy:  
An Intellectual Biography  
of Gerald Birney Smith,  
1868–1929

By

W. Creighton Peden

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

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This book first published 2014

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-6169-3, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-6169-4

To  
My Friend and Colleague  
John N. Gaston



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## PREFACE

For the past fifty years, I have been researching and writing on the empirical tradition in American philosophy and religious thought for the years 1860 through 1960.

My first focus was on the Free Religious Association, formed in 1867. The FRA was composed of thinkers who accepted Darwin's findings and who were committed to the scientific method in all areas of their exploration. Free Religion meant freedom from all religious traditions, holy books, and superstitions. The second phase of the empirical tradition focused on those philosophers and theologians who composed the early University of Chicago Divinity School. To be a member of this faculty, one had to commit to the scientific method in all areas of exploration. Gerald Birney Smith joined the Chicago Divinity School faculty in 1900 and served as their primary person in theology.

The current volume on Gerald Birney Smith concludes my research and writing on the empirical tradition. For those who would like to explore further, a complete list of "Publications from the Empirical Project" is included near the end of this volume.

If you will explore the Table of Contents, you will note that we begin with a Historical Sketch, consider Smith's writings in three different decades, and conclude each decade with a summary "windup." This approach provides the reader the opportunity to consider the development of Smith's theology.

I am indebted to Sue Barrett, a friend since my doctoral studies at St. Andrews University, for serving as an external critic for this manuscript. Sue provided detailed suggestions, for which I would like to express my sincere appreciation. I also wish to express my appreciation to Pamela Crosby for her assistance in securing copies of articles by G. B. Smith. I am also indebted to John N. Gaston, a close friend and fellow graduate of Davidson College, for his computer assistance, as I am more than technologically challenged. Appreciation is also expressed to the University of Chicago Libraries and to the Hudson Library of Highlands, North Carolina.

—W. Creighton Peden, 2014



## HISTORICAL SKETCH

Gerald Birney Smith (May 3, 1868–April 3, 1929) was born in Middlefield, Massachusetts. His parents were Metcalf John and Harriet Louise (Eldredge) Smith. He was a descendent of Matthew Smith, who emigrated from England to Massachusetts in 1637. Smith attended the public schools of Middlefield and received further education at home from his father, who was college educated. Metcalf Smith expressed progressive views and engaged in philosophizing.

Smith attended Brown University, receiving the A.B. degree in 1891. After graduation, Smith accepted a one-year teaching position at Oberlin Academy where he taught Latin. He left Oberlin to teach mathematics and foreign languages at Worcester Academy for three years. On July 10, 1894, Smith married Inez Michener of New Sharon, Iowa. They moved to New York City in order that he might seek further education at Union Theology Seminary. Smith receiving the B.D. degree summa cum laude in 1898, as well as the M.A. magna cum laude from Columbia University in the same year. He also received Union's two-year traveling fellowship. The Smiths spent the two years in Europe, with his studying in Berlin, Marburg, and Paris. Upon their return from Europe in 1900, Smith received a call to the Divinity School of the new University of Chicago, to be an Instructor in Systematic Theology and Ethics. In 1909, Brown University conferred the Doctor of Divinity degree upon Smith.

Like other faculty in the Divinity School, the Smiths joined Hyde Park Baptist Church. They were active participants in Hyde Park, with Smith teaching classes, as well as serving in different offices in the Church. After two years at Hyde Park Baptist, he was ordained by the congregation as a Baptist Minister in 1902.

Following his study in Germany, Smith was greatly influenced by Albrecht Ritschl's *Geschichte des Pietismus* and the general Ritschlian perspective. Smith then infused his Ritschlian perspective with the mystical piety of his teacher W. Herrmann, especially Hermann's *Der evangelische Glaube und die Theologie Albrecht Ritschls*.

In his teaching, Smith stressed experience as a basis for theology rather than Biblical teaching. This approach led him increasingly to the claims of scientific and democratic ideals. In Smith's initial monograph entitled

*Practical Theology* 1903, he stressed the conflict between the interests of science and practical religion. However, Smith urged the establishment of a new department to adjust the scientific conclusions of critical theology to human religious needs. He attempted to demonstrate such an adjustment in an essay, along with two Biblical scholars, E. D. Burton and J. M. P. Smith, in *Biblical Ideas of Atonement: Their History and Significance*, 1909. In this essay, he stressed the importance of critical insights for a vital religious experience. In a volume edited by Smith, *A Guide to the Study of the Christian Religion* 1916, he sought to assist pastors seeking to keep in touch with recent scholarship. Later he edited a supplementary volume, *Religious Thought in the Last Quarter-Century* 1927. Smith's chapter was a prolegomenon to an empirical theology, instead of the method of authority. In *Principles of Living* 1924, he presented his perspective on Christian Ethics. His final book, *Current Christian Thinking* 1928, presented a critical survey of diverse appeals to authority and provided an utterly empirical methodology for reconstructing theology. Smith was known as an incisive and systematic teacher who inspired his students to independent thinking. As an individual and as a teacher, he was friendly, with a good sense of humor.

Bernard E. Meland, a future Divinity faculty member, was a student of Smith's. He also had Smith as his doctoral advisor (who was replaced by Henry Nelson Wieman at Smith's death). Meland considered Smith to have a mystical aspect to his theology, which spoke to Meland's own mystic orientation. Meland recalled, "The most single influence upon my thinking during graduate school days was Gerald Birney Smith. My devotion to him was so complete that for years after his death, I thought of my own work and writing as a continuation of his labors, which had been cut off so untimely."<sup>1</sup> Meland also spoke of Smith's talents as a teacher: "Smith's talents were definitely critical rather than constructive. I do not recall any major course under him in which a constructive line of analysis was attempted. His ability to enter into another man's position and to interpret the constructive turns of thought, upon which the particular author under consideration had ventured, was remarkable. His incisive mind and his economy of language enabled him to delineate a point of view with simplicity and sharpness that made it immediately available to the students' minds. Then with a slyness that seemed at first harmless and which seemed to make his remarks almost incidental, he would drive his spears of criticism into the point of view under analysis."<sup>2</sup>

In addition to his teaching and writing, Smith presented the Nathaniel William Taylor Lectures at Yale University in 1912 and the Earle Lectures at Pacific School of Religion in 1920. Smith served for several years as

chairperson of the University Orchestral Association, as president of the Board of the University of Chicago Settlement, and as an adviser to the Religious Education Association. Smith and Shailer Mathews edited *A Dictionary of Religion and Ethics* 1921. From 1909 to 1920, Smith served as managing editor of the *American Journal of Theology* and as founding editor of the *Journal of Religion* from 1921 until his sudden death in 1929. His wife and son, Cecil Michener Smith, who was a graduate student at Harvard University, survived him.

G. B. Smith was never comfortable with his professorial discipline, designated “systematic theology” from 1900 to 1906. From 1906 to 1913, he served as Associate Professor of Dogmatic Theology. In 1913, he became Professor of Christian Theology and served in that capacity until his death in 1929. Although Smith was a noted mathematician and musician, his primary responsibility was in theology. Smith’s special concern was the relationship of Christian ethics to the modern world. Although he was fully a part of the general social gospel and pragmatic orientation of his peers in the early years at Chicago, Smith’s theological and philosophical position was closest to that of George Burman Foster.

Cecil Michener Smith, wrote “Some Memories of Gerald Birney Smith”, which was published in *The Divinity School News* on February 15, 1939. He noted that his father had grown up on a New England farm, located about a mile from Middlefield, which was a small hamlet that was quite isolated. “Consequently the social life of Middlefield was confined to the simple, inexpensive pleasures of those who could manage to get together. Singing schools, church suppers, and all-day preaching fests were the sum and substance of community life in those days. Over and over again, year after year, the same people got together and amused one another in the same ways.”<sup>3</sup> G. B. Smith devoted himself to learning how to know and understand the simple folk of the community. He always attended the annual Fourth of July picnic in Middlefield, long after becoming a university professor. “With my father it was a sacred ritual to make the rounds of all the bean pots, sampling each farmer’s wife’s recipe, and offering exceedingly heartfelt compliments to those whose beans gave evidence of a superior culinary secret. After lunch, he joined enthusiastically the three-legged races and softball. Then when the formal climax of the afternoon arrived, he was led to the speaker’s platform. From this point of vantage he delivered a short homily.”<sup>4</sup>

C. M. Smith suggested that his father’s capacity to absorb himself in the mind of the group was a strong and positive characteristic of his role as a teacher. “...I have known him to spend endless patient hours trying to help his pupils become objective enough to absorb the facts of both sides

of the controversy.”<sup>5</sup> He further postulated that, toward the end of his father’s career, he gained a mystical sense. “In the last four years of his life he became intensely critical of the methods and aims of current Protestant worship, and began to plead for the placing of liberal religion upon a more dignified artistic plane.”<sup>6</sup>

# FIRST DECADE

## The Writings

### **Practical Theology: A Neglected Field in Theological Education**

In “Practical Theology: A Neglected Field in Theological Education” 1903, Smith questioned whether a divinity school which has adopted the scientific method can fulfill its responsibility to train ministers to serve local congregations. If not, what solution is compatible with the integrity of the scientific orientation in the curriculum?

Smith reminds us that spiritual truths and scientific truths differ psychologically. All scientific hypotheses or conclusions are open to re-examination and revision, if facts warrant it. The historian constantly encourages questioning which often leads to demolishing the untested theories of students who enter the divinity school. The student is forced to overthrow or modify present conclusions. A student trained in the historical method acquires the habit of making provisional decisions. Smith cautioned “...there is little difference between the fundamental agnosticism of the avowed infidel and the judicial doubt of the critical scholar.”<sup>7</sup>

If the divinity of Christ is doubted, it makes limited difference to an individual for whom the divinity of Christ is of supreme value. To a person of action the primary thing is having a positive conviction. If anything interferes with one’s positive conviction, it is rejected as being destructive and agnostic. The scholar recognizes that a person adapted for practical work may not be capable of treating history in a scientific spirit. He suggested that an interpretation is true only when it applies to the real thought expressed in the interpretation. Smith reminds us that we first must know what the Bible actually teaches before we can make use of it with any kind of accuracy.

The scholar may proclaim the advantageous results of the historical method, with the results being rehearsed with distressing results. Most important to the practical person is the loss evident in substituting

intellectual curiosity for spiritual authority. Suspending judgment and being willing to enter either of two conflicting postulates are conditions of science but may result in the death for active faith. When two interests are diverse in kind, provision for the scientific does not necessarily involve adequate grounding for practical ends. Performing the scientific task of articulating Christian truth is incomplete until it produces both practical and historical theology.

Smith noted four kinds of exegesis, with three having a distinctively practical end. The allegorical approach enabled Christian content to be read into the Old Testament. The moral sense provided practical direction for ordinary Christian life. The anagogical approach satisfied our supramundane aspirations. For Thomas Aquinas the chief end of the study of scriptures was to determine the doctrine to serve the practical needs of the church.

When theological faculties were established, their job was only to expound the Scriptures in relation to approved traditional doctrines. The scientific and the practical ideals were not thought to be different, so there was no need for a special department of practical theology. This made possible the transfer of church history from the practical disciplines to the historical. The pragmatic method of teaching history was replaced by an inductive approach seeking the facts, whether these facts referred to the practical lessons or not. The historical approach in biblical studies stressed not reading into a passage what the writer did not intend. The figurative and allegorical approaches, which had been important in the traditional method, now must be abandoned. The scientific approach required the student to ascertain the real historic meaning of a book before attempting to make practical applications of the book. The conservative approach sought to reproduce scriptural truth, contending that a translation was not needed. What the conservatives did not require was another translation of scriptural doctrine in light of modern psychological counterparts. Rather, they sought complete abandonment of modern attempts to formulate religious ideas.

Smith realized that our educational approach was so secularized that biblical references in literature were not recognized by most of the students. From the teachings in science, the students had a new conception of a human relationship to what had been considered ultimate reality. The old theory held that people are required to undergird their religious thinking by the teachings of Scriptures.

Scripture was now a relic of precritical scholarship. Smith opined:

“While education and environment have transported the einfaltige Layen out of the biblical cosmos into the world of modern science, out of the



simple surroundings of Palestinian peasants into the complex world of industrial America in the twentieth century, out of the individualistic and supernaturalistic religious ideal of the past into the social and ethical ideal of the future, the education of the theological student has been transporting him back into that very world which is becoming so strange to laymen... If the minister's attempt to introduce such critical conclusions in his preaching, he may indeed arouse the intellectual curiosity of his hearers; but he will soon find that a subtle barrier has arisen between him and his distinctly 'evangelical' brethren. It is the inevitable difference between scientific truth and spiritual truth which thus sets the critic apart from the evangelist."<sup>8</sup>

Another solution to the recognized problem that biblical theology did not adapt to modern needs was the contention that religious faith was not attached to past events but to contemporary reality. This required that we abstract the eternal kernel of revealed truth from its historical usage. The congregation may be taught the spiritual truth, but it will be packaged in a logically complete system. However, a normal person today rejects the notion of original sin as portrayed by traditional theology. It was even more difficult to present the Adamic account to a congregation which accepted Darwin's theory of human origin. Or consider the issue of eschatology. A modern educated person would find it difficult to entertain the calamitous end of the world noted in the New Testament. Many theologians had rejected being a scriptural systematizer and had attempted to reconstruct a statement of belief that was a direct articulation of Christian experience. In this fashion theology ceased to be based on an objective historical discipline.

The influence of modern science is indispensable if the student is to provide an intelligent account of beliefs that are provocative of a more vital understanding of Christian truth. However, their primary value will be more scientific than practical. Smith questioned whether the present departments of practical theology could meet the needs of the student involved in critical studies. Traditionally practical theology was considered the science of cultivating ecclesiastical religious life. Certainly the minister performs ecclesiastical functions. However, the minister also has a prophetic role which deserves more attention than it presently receives. The practical training of divinity students is now primarily to promote ecclesiastical efficiency. Practical theology should enable the student to establish the practical function of the knowledge obtained from other departments. Smith contended that the content of the student's theology must be scientifically ascertained. He explained: "This same content, however, is not a genuinely scientific expression of Christianity unless it embodies the psychological realities which make up religious

experience, and this, too, in a form which can be apprehended by a non-theological audience. All pedantry must be eliminated... In order to give psychological evaluation to religious doctrines, a thorough study of the psychology of religious experience would be indispensable.”<sup>9</sup> The real truth of Christianity is to be found in life. To establish this truth requires the historical method and a psychological understanding.

### **Atonement In The Light of Modern Thought**

In *Atonement* Chapter XIII: “Atonement In The Light of Modern Thought” 1900, Smith noted that since biblical times Christians have understood atonement in light of Adam and Eve’s sin over eating the forbidden fruit, for which future humans will pay the penalty of death. One must remember that the Adam and Eve account was not an original Hebraic story, that when the tribes returned from exile they brought the story with them.

Smith noted that a doctrine of atonement based on the Adam and Eve mythology fails to come to grip with our contemporary moral life. However, this view of sin in modern times has been employed against business excess, gambling, child labor, and other individual and social excesses. Smith opined; “In the social consciousness of our age there is latent a sense of moral obliquity which despairs of a *laissez-faire* policy, and which cries out for deliverance. If Christianity can link its doctrine of atonement to the *real* sense of sin, it will not have to devise arguments to persuade men to accept it.”<sup>10</sup>

Atonement today cannot be understood as appeasement of an angry monarch-God. Over the centuries, there have been many proposed reconstructions of the theory of atonement. However, all fail because they begin with the God of traditional theology. To erect an adequate doctrine of atonement we should begin with the realization that humans have acted damnably toward each other.

An adequate doctrine of atonement today cannot rely on the Fatherliness of God, in light of the desperate moral issues in which humans are involved. Smith noted that crimes of wicked persons against humanity are more real in modern times than crimes of humans against God. The reality of these crimes against humanity demands we begin by acknowledging our debt to humanity.

Smith realized that so far we had been unable to modernize the doctrine of God satisfactorily to confront the moral demands of our contemporary age. He argued that the Copernican astronomy, the doctrine of evolution, and the strength of democracy had negated the biblical picture of God. “Unless God can be felt to *hate* the sin which humanity

hates, men will turn to the social agitator rather than to the Christian Church.”<sup>11</sup> God must be immanent in modern times as a suffering God who bears the burden of the evils of this world. Smith suggested that this conception of God must be the conception of a developing theology, for evil affects God.

If God is immanently involved with humanity and if God actually bears the evil done to God’s children, then atonement for an outraged humanity is atonement made to God. Democracy requires satisfaction, for those who have been anti-social and who have selfishly mistreated others for their own profit will be punished. Smith noted that those who act in unsatisfactory ways are also those who share and approve the social consciousness that condemns them for their actions or lack of actions. External punishment for their actions does not confront the root of the matter. Conversion or change of heart as the supreme atonement for the sins of the past is the requirement of democracy. Smith explained “...if this takes place, democracy is willing, nay glad, to take upon itself the consequences of the wrong, to endure the pains resulting from past evils in order to set free the converted soul to devote its energies to the social welfare.”<sup>12</sup>

If Jesus completely identified with the moral rights of humanity, then he can be the redeemer of humanity. However, if humanity comes to believe Jesus was the perfect expression of the ideal that humans seek, believe Jesus took upon himself the burdens of moral strife, and was faithful to the ideal at the cost of being crucified; then we can believe Jesus to be the perfect expression of the moral will of the immanent God. Jesus was crucified being unwilling to be false to the divine will, with the cross becoming the eternal symbol of identification with God.

### **The Significance of the Biblical Teachings Concerning Atonement**

In *The Significance of the Biblical Teachings Concerning Atonement* 1909, Smith began with the question “what is the value of biblical material to men in the twentieth century who wish to formulate vital convictions.”<sup>13</sup> In attempting to answer the question, one is tempted to include one’s particular interpretation of biblical texts. The historical method of biblical interpretation provides insights into the actual experiences of the person whose convictions are being interpreted. For the historical student, the biblical teachings are not *ultimate*, but are means by which we grasp the actual situations and spiritual problems presented by the biblical writers. The historical method provides concrete occasions of spiritual accomplishment that inspire one’s thinking.

Our focus turns to these concrete realities of the Bible, which are conditioned by the historical and social environment. However, we must remember that what serves as a solution to a religious issue in one age may not serve in a subsequent age. Theology is always in a process of being reconstructed as humans experience change. An evaluation of the biblical doctrine of atonement provided insights into the problem of God's dealing with humans, and provided insights into how religious communion with God was possible for humans who were sinful.

The Semitic people lived a tribal existence, where maintaining a right relation to God was essential. Thus, the essential trait of the Hebrews' religion was a constant emphasis on the moral nature of atonement. However, they had to learn that God does not always accept repentance on the part of a wrongdoer. Atonement is not found in the sacramental conceptions that the Hebrews shared with other groups in antiquity. Rather, atonement means the total triumph of the ideal of righteousness. Any theory that does not involve the highest moral standard should be denounced. The Old Testament view of atonement required judging one's inner moral quality.

Another element with which Israel dealt was a solution to the problem of evil. They viewed events in nature as punishment, which served to recall the people to their obligations to God. By seeking national acclaim, they sought to promote their religion. Even the destruction of Israel was taken as God way of leading the people to righteousness. When Israel was in Exile, they developed the concept of redemption in the form of vicarious suffering. It was by suffering that the unaware came to view vicarious suffering as a spiritual accomplishment that the righteous God provided as a transcendent interpretation of the mystery of life. This interpretation was later of positive value in bringing the gentiles to knowledge of God. "To believe that righteous men, by moral transformation through suffering in the very moment of seeming defeat and humiliation to be actually working out the redemptive purpose of God, is to give to the world a transcendent interpretation of the deepest mystery of life."<sup>14</sup> Even if the evil we do serves the purpose of the righteous God, it remains evil, even when it is totally moralized. Atonement by vicarious suffering allows evil to be part of God's world without destroying faith in God. The only way to win God's approval is by keeping the law of righteousness. This understanding resulted in the danger of a mechanical interpretation of religious life. One may become so committed to technical demands that one is unable to show God's love toward those in need.

Jesus devoted his life to this higher revelation, with his death demonstrating the conflict between the divine revelation of goodness and the

hostility of aroused persons. Jesus denounced those external factors that blocked people from being devoted to an inner devotion to the will of God. Smith postulated that it was the witness of the spirit and not a theory of atonement, which enabled early Christians their confidence. Atonement is misrepresented when its primary emphasis is on an external balancing of accounts.

Shifting to Paul's theory of the atonement, we must keep in mind that Paul was trained in the school of legalism. After his religious experience, Paul understood that it was legalism which led to Jesus's death. Paul's preaching was an attempt to lift people out of legalism into a legalistic conception of the atonement, which indicated that the law is superseded by the righteousness, made possible in Christ. However, every person fails to exemplify keeping the law of God. On that basis, none would escape God's death penalty, as God would show God's absolute condemnation of sin. The penalty that humans deserve fell upon the redemptive power of Christ. God was not satisfied with an external punishment of sin because the sinner deserved death. Paul's purpose was to suppress the legalistic ideal of the relationship between God and humans and to replace it by "the inner experience of the redemptive work of Christ."<sup>15</sup> Paul's atonement expounded an insightful inward and spiritual redemption, which was to occur in human souls by the presence of Christ, and the mystical experience of the Christian with Jesus's death and resurrection. Paul expounds this view because he patterned his life on certain religious ideals. If in modern thinkers Paul's conceptions do not encompass vital religious convictions, they forfeit his religious suggestions.

The focus in the Epistle to the Hebrews is on the conception of sacrifice, attempting to demonstrate that Christ released his followers from all externalism. People had entered, because of the work of Christ, in a new covenant that was in their heart but not outwardly fulfilled. Jesus's sufferings were viewed as the means of his spiritual flawlessness. The followers of Christ were to connect with Jesus's inner self in order to benefit from his redemptive work. "The inner transformation of the Christian is of more importance than the ritual of sacrifice."<sup>16</sup>

In the Old and New Testaments, the religious convictions of the age moved toward a perfect expression of the atonement as making people inwardly righteous. God's concern was for humans, to turn them from sin—to transform them spiritually—to inward righteousness. This inward righteousness justified acquittal by God's true judgment and was not a mere technical release.

The death of Jesus was the great mystery to be explained. The writers of the New Testament converted the Messiah's death into a revelation of

God's redemptive love. Previously the cross was a symbol of disgrace, but Paul made it the symbol of God's love and of God's way of transforming the world. Smith opined, "The redemptive purpose of God is supremely revealed in the vicarious suffering of the One who completely incarnated the divine love and righteousness."<sup>17</sup> Paul was concerned that salvation be understood as affirming without question God's righteousness in God's securing human salvation. Thus, the death of Christ was not a defeat for God. Rather, it was *the* demonstration of God's power to save. The significance of atonement in biblical teaching was found in the spiritual meaning of thinking about God-humans relations. The details of this redemptive theology were to enforce the ideal of moral salvation and the cost of such redemption. Suffering became evidence of God's election.

Smith shifted the focus to modern thought regarding atonement, recognizing that many modern persons have difficulty with the doctrine of the atonement. Therefore, in order to attain its significance, the doctrine must be restated so that it may be received more positively presented in modern language. Smith recognized that such an effort would most likely be a failure, because it would make atonement to appear fatally artificial. It just may be that there are no modern equivalents to the biblical doctrine of atonement.

A problem concerns the idea of sacrifice to an age that has abandoned this form of religious cultus. The notion of shedding blood being of religious value is absurd because it has no real significance in modern life. What was considered the most vital element in religion is now considered by modern people to be a formal transaction. What is true of the term "sacrifice," applies also for many biblical terms. Smith explained: "But no concept from a far-away age artificially introduced into our circle of thought can begin to compare in influence and power with the concepts inwrought into our thinking by the stress of actual life."<sup>18</sup> To attempt to reinterpret biblical conceptions with equivalent modern conceptions is impossible because we have no modern equivalents. The Bible is considered a living book because it deals with truth directly from life.

The history of the doctrine of atonement illustrates the inherent value of beginning with actual life. The theories that were retained in permanent form employed conceptions real to the time in which they were formulated. However, none of the historical theological attempts has been able to reproduce the biblical doctrine. Because of these failed attempts, our first task is to grasp the essential ingredients of modern thought, and then to ascertain how these ideas may be interpreted based on our Christian convictions.

There has been a decline in the sense of sin by modern persons because they no longer think in terms of "conviction of sin." Religious experience today is based on a desire to lead a better life, which does not necessarily involve a radical inner transformation. The modern notion of atonement no longer proclaims redemption from God's curse. The biblical doctrine of atonement was based on an agonizing conviction of sin, which required special adjustments. The incarnation and crucifixion were appropriate in that age, but that age has long since gone. Now we view, based on biology, that death is not due to sin but is a normal element of life. A doctrine of atonement based on these classical elements fails to have meaning in our moral life.

Smith suggested that certain contemporary facts have generated a new sense of sin. Many members of churches are devoted to the worship of Mammon by being committed to worldly success without concern for human welfare. This orientation is being confronted by an ethical revival today that is focused on the real sense of sin. The workers feel this injustice most acutely. There is also a moral protest that condemns ecclesiastical Christianity for its failure of refuting the oppressors and in general neglecting justice and mercy. Smith reminds us that we all are involved in the social and industrial system, which generates these injustices. He contended that "in the social consciousness of our age there is latent a sense of moral obliquity which despairs of a *laissez-faire* policy, and which cries out for deliverance."<sup>19</sup>

The same process that limited our view of sin has also made a monarch-God untenable. The doctrine of evolution refutes the special creation of humans, which necessitated a changed conception of God. Human origin is not due to a transcendent creative act, but to a slow development of a world-process. If there is a creative God, this God is the immanent power in the universe rather than an outside king. In our political democracy, laws come from the people and not from an immanent authority. Furthermore, in ethics we refer to moral laws that have no transcendent source. Heaven and hell today are states of character. To attain God's approval, one simply elevates one character to merit approval. Smith postulated that a theology that attempted to explain the meaning of life in terms of an outmoded conception of God in relation to the world was powerless. No longer could atonement be the propitiation of an angry monarch-God, for atonement must be based on a real sense of sin. Thus, reparation is due to humanity whose rights have been enraged. Such reparation can only begin with the repentance of greedy persons. So long as one begins with the God of traditional theology instead of the fact that humans have acted horribly toward other humans, we are left with trying

to preach the love rather than the wrath of God. Unless God hates the sin which humanity hates, society is better off with social agitators instead of the Christian church. Morally the work has not begun and can only be done by those who have the conviction that God actually cares. For those who have worked long days just to survive surely have some claim upon God apart from our being miserable sinners. As Smith proclaimed, "this kind of God is no God at all. The theologian may call him infinite, but in practice he is finite."<sup>20</sup> Certainly this God cannot be the God of love.

If God is to be real to us, our new theology must be based on our moral awakening, which is being manifest as a social religion of power. The social movements for the rescue of all citizens are separated from the religion of the pew, because the redemptive theology of the church is useless in its present form. If future generations are to speak of the doctrine of atonement, it will be in terms that a social worker will comprehend. This doctrine must emerge from our deeper interpretation of the moral struggles that are real today. However, the practical evils of life are not easily eliminated. Evil is a very practical thing, so it must be of importance to God. Smith explained: "If God is really immanent, if he is really at the heart of the cosmic process, then he must actually be bearing the burden of evil in his world, or else he will become the helpless fate-god of pantheism."<sup>21</sup> Smith suggested that the wicked-will of persons caused an actual defeat of God's ideals. He further suggested that the coming theology must conceive of God as bearing the burdens of the evil world. Some prophet may arise who will interpret our moral suffering with a God who identifies with our suffering and moral struggle. When this occurs, we will have a God of power.

If God is bearing our burdens of evil, then God in humanity is against the sinners against humanity. A democracy can only be satisfied if the person who has been anti-social shall approve the social consciousness that condemns it. "Democracy demands conversion—a change of heart—as the supreme atonement for the sins of the past."<sup>22</sup> Paul considered Christ to represent the sum-total of suffering for human sins. Atonement involved Christ's suffering and the suffering of sinners who identified with Christ. Smith suggested that the modern democratic spirit demanded a similar view of the sinner with the suffering caused by wrong.

In considering the significance of the cross of Christ, it must be interpreted from a basic belief in a God who is immanent in humanity. Jesus's significance for modern thought cannot be made clear by starting with a transcendent divine decree or by trying to define the transcendent deity of Christ. People wanted to know if Jesus has a positive concern for modern persons' moral struggle. It is only by showing that Jesus



completely identified with the moral rights of humanity that he could be the redeemer of humanity. If Jesus took upon himself the burden of human moral strife, then we can believe Jesus to be the incarnation of the immanent God who shares with humans the burden of evil. To say that Jesus was crucified to fulfill the divine purpose means that the cross is the eternal representation of identification with God. Thus, sacrifice and suffering are God's way of redeeming people. However, the moral influence theories of atonement have not demonstrated how the cross provides assurance to the penitent of God's forgiveness and favor. Salvation occurs, but not because of a transaction between God and humans. It is because humans share the life of God by identifying with the way of the cross.

Smith noted that doctrines are attempts to make consistent the reality based on actual experience. Biblical experiences are different from modern experiences, due to contemporary social, political, and scientific environment. However, we are like biblical persons in that we are unable to undo the evil we have done. We must rely on God's judgment concerning the consequences of our actions. "The doctrine of atonement means that God assumes this burden, and enables the sinner to find through repentance and consecration an assurance of union with God which nothing can disturb."<sup>23</sup>

### **Biblical Criticism and the Christmas Message**

In "Biblical Criticism and the Christmas Message," 1910, Smith noted that German New Testament scholars had been forced to become defenders of the faith. They had employed the methods of historical criticism to get behind myths and legends to the "historical Jesus." Some scholars claimed that the logical outcome of this scholarship was to eliminate Jesus from the development and growth of Christianity. The battle raged as the question turned to whether Jesus of the Gospels ever lived. Professor Weinel, a German theologian, questioned whether this radical criticism had made preaching impossible. He further affirmed that the critical method allowed for a dynamic faith in Jesus. In England the question was, in light of critical scholarship, whether Jesus should be called divine. Smith suggested that these questions have caused confusion to pastors, informed by critical scholarship, who desire to preach the truth and not just what is emotionally acceptable.

From this perspective, Smith wondered what one could sincerely say about Jesus in a Christmas sermon. Critics have questioned the validity of the historicity of the infancy narratives, since many scholars consider the narratives to be legends. Professor Sanday suggested two types of

Christology based on critical scholarship—a full and a reduced Christology. Smith explained: “The ‘full’ Christology, according to Dr. Sanday, employs critical conclusions merely to furnish the foundation upon which religious thinking may build the amplest possible structure in which faith may find its home. The ‘reduced’ Christology, on the other hand, insists that we must content ourselves with sure foundations. The desire to be absolutely honest with the facts means in this latter case a more or less clearly recognized agnosticism.”<sup>24</sup> Dr. Sanday advocated the “full” type of Christology based on psychological investigations which suggested that each individual, based on the view that through their subliminal consciousness, they could reach into a region not accessible to ordinary consciousness. Smith noted that William James in *Varieties of Religious Experience* had a similar suggestion for contact with the divine.

Smith claimed that this simply transfers the issue from historical criticism into that of psychological criticism, without establishing a Christology beyond the impact of criticism. Theology cannot be isolated from the rest of life. Sanday concluded that anything like the biblical doctrine of the divine nature of Christ must be made reasonable to thinking persons in order that they realize the presence of God in human life. Smith contended that the New Testament does not appeal to any “subliminal consciousness” in order to explain the divinity of Jesus. He recognized that biblical criticism often appears “destructive,” but raising problems is only for the purpose of reaching conclusions that are more tenable. For centuries, theological questions were claimed true if they conformed to a doctrine contained in the Bible. Now, based on biblical criticism, people are free of the quantitative approach of measuring religious affirmations; they are free—based on criticism—to form a theology based on trying to affirm all elements of New Testament doctrine.

Smith indicated that criticism is both negative and positive, as it furnishes an appreciation of forms of faith recognized to embody transitory features. One will be more in tune with the apostolic age based on criticism, which enables us to value positively the faith of the apostles. Criticism has revealed different forms of belief in the New Testament. Each New Testament writer has embodied the Christ of faith into the writer’s own worldview. The significance of different perspectives in the New Testament lies in the various theologies that developed. These writers, like ourselves, share the social ideals of the time and incorporate these ideals into our religious thought. “The Jesus in whom the disciples believed was the marvelous figure with characteristics corresponding to the socialized ideas of messianic activity which conditioned the thinking

of the early Christians.”<sup>25</sup> We should find in contemporary thinking divergence of doctrines, just as in the New Testament.

Smith considered the purpose of a Christmas sermon is to indicate the significance of Jesus in order that we might share in the optimism of the infancy accounts. What we seek to preserve is the *spirit* of the New Testament. He suggested that preachers, employing the critical methods today, attempted to preach the same as preachers in the first century. Smith contended that criticism does not provide the bare facts concerning Jesus. The disciples’ Christology was seen, as they understood their faith, directly based on ideas already persuasive in social life. Smith suggested that criticism has done its job when it enables us to understand how disciples introduced Jesus as the source of saving power of the world. The question, which confronts contemporary persons, is whether we have a personal love and trust of Jesus to give him a supreme place in our lives. The value of criticism is that it frees us of trying to operate in a first-century worldview.

### **The Task and Method of Systematic Theology**

In “The Task and Method of Systematic Theology” 1910, Smith contended that a theology, based on an outgrown form of statement, loses its power to interest or convince humans, who are influenced by the inductive sciences and who judge human effort by the standard of efficiency, as seen in the use of business. The task of the theologian is to discover and formulate methods that correlate the theologian’s learning with other forms of learning. In time, the ecclesiastical control was eliminated. Today science has adopted the facts.

The problem remained of stating the facts that confront theology, in order that they can be identified and differentiated. Since Schleiermacher, most theologians focused on those aspects of human experience that might be considered religious. “Theology thus comes to be the systematic presentation of our fundamental religious convictions.”<sup>26</sup> In time, experience was understood to be complex, conditioned by historical circumstances and the ever-changing environment. Experience is not a fountain from which permanent conclusions flow. However, theologians attempted to relate Christian experience to a golden age of Jesus, which provided an element of finality and provided to theology a definite focus, which may be systematically expounded without the aid of any science. The influence of Jesus was the material upon which theologians could build a system.

Some theologians considered this approach overly subjective and narrowly dogmatic. The older theology claimed its doctrines were based

on the objective revelation of God. For a theology based on human experience, abandoning this objective test was viewed as utter folly. Those conditioned by the ideal of research questioned whether a type of religious experience could be separated from other experiences as a doctrinal norm. Those working in psychology of religion demonstrated that Christian experiences are also found in other religions. New Testament scholars demonstrated that the Christian faith has never been totally under the influence of Jesus. Modern biblical scholars rejected Ritschl's systematic theology as untenable because it failed to establish a definite method for dealing with the material, even though they retained the notion of an *absolute* or *final* theology, which fit the authoritarian method and was inconsistent with an inductive approach. While acknowledging that religious ideas change according to humans' changing needs, some theologians still considered their task to be a defense and exposition of the New Testament faith as a canon to test doctrinal issues. "If we are to have the truth of God rather than the opinion of men, we must insist on some super-empirical test of human opinion."<sup>27</sup>

The response of practical faith often screens scientific problems. If theological conclusions must rest on some absolute standard, the task is to establish the absolute standard. Since human experience is relative, it cannot meet an absolute standard. Jesus and special inspiration provided the basis for the norm of religious thinking. Based on scientific exposition, the validity of a conclusion depends on whether it meets the demands of empirical testing.

Smith indicated that the vast majority of people are educated by the church to accept a super-empirical revelation as the norm of correct religious thinking. However, if human limitations are granted to Jesus, it limits the super-empirical basis on which theology needs to build. So long as criticism is feared, the theologian who puts critics out of doors has an advantage. Although all divisions of the church rely on the New Testament as the foundation of their theology, the diversity of opinion has led to religious wars. Smith contended that, by adopting the historical method and the view of social psychology, a principle of explanation might establish constructive results, as an adequate understanding of doctrine requires a correct understanding of the problems requiring solution.

Smith suggested that a clue to the task of systematic theology might be found in the history of religious beliefs. By analyzing the underlying development of past religious beliefs, we gain its significance. Possibly an equal analysis of the conditions of modern life would suggest the form of religious belief most adequate for today. However, if we hold an ideal of authority, modifications of doctrine will not be considered a positive

achievement. Certainly, the theory of evolution had caused theology to revise the doctrine of creation. However, if evolution is infused by historical study, the theologian may make theology appear truer to the facts.

Smith postulated four main tasks necessary in the scientific formulation of adequate religious beliefs for today. He stated the four tasks: "(1) the historical understanding of the growth and significance of the religious ideals which constitute our social inheritance; (2) the analysis of present religious needs; (3) the interpretation of these needs in such a way as to suggest religious convictions which shall be at the same time practically efficient and rationally defensible; and (4) the apologetic defense of the theological convictions reached."<sup>28</sup> These four are linked to the empirical task of revealing what should be adequate religious convictions for today, based on understanding human life in its total relationships.

Smith recognized that the methods and aims of historical investigation are accepted, as are the methods and aims of any science. The historian seeks to ascertain the events of the past and to show how these forces influenced the aspirations, beliefs, and initiatives of humanity. The theologian seeks an accurate understanding of the reasons for the fundamental ideas and organizations in the history of religion. It is especially important to understand the activities of the past century from which our doctrines have evolved and their influence on science, philosophy, and literature. It is only by acquaintance with human religious development that one can understand how theology is made. Smith opined, "Indeed, one of the conspicuous traits of the empirical method of studying human life is the large and positive use which is made of the experiments and achievements of the race in the past. But it should never be forgotten that the theologian is dealing with the problems and convictions of his own day, and that these are his primary concern."<sup>29</sup> Theologians must abandon individualistic points of view and accepted doctrines in order to do justice to the social facts that are shaping a potent moral appeal for people today.

Smith recognized that many theologians were treating science as a preaching device for harmonizing theology and science. However, theologians should employ their constructive imagination while insisting on verification by appeal to the facts. This process should provide an adequate working hypothesis for dealing with the experiment of life, at least until a better grasp of things is achieved. Smith contended: "...If the moral and religious problems due to our modern social and industrial life were to receive a similar scientific attention, it might be found possible to formulate a living theology definitely correlated to the social situation."<sup>30</sup>

The theologian deals with human life in its broad complexity, while interpreting life by those religious beliefs thought to help humans struggle with the experiment of living. The theologian postulates that religious convictions are important to the development of personal and social experience. It is hoped that understanding the nature and function of these beliefs will promote the efficiency of a wholesome religious life.

Human thought seeks information about the Power that brought us into existence. An analysis of the social situation must take into account human concern regarding this Power or it will be unable to treat, in an adequate manner, the deeper interests of humans. In order to provide an adequate analysis, the theologian must employ the scientific method, to be able to judge whether a particular theological orientation is adequate for enlisting religious beliefs in a given age and environment.

Smith postulated that Christianity, basically, is in accord with the scientific spirit. He found the insights of Jesus into human religious needs and the power of Jesus's teaching and character to be adequate and efficient in the construction of theology. Smith proclaimed that based on a scientific study of religion, one must see in Jesus the most significant source of religious faith in all human history. In this fashion, the theologian has employed the empirical method. However, his task will also establish the inadequacy of any philosophy of life that fails to consider human religious needs and to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity over rival religious theories.