

ALONGSIDE FOUNDATIONALISM: ADVENTISM'S ALTERNATIVE PROTESTANT PHILOSOPHICAL PATH

NICHOLAS MILLER¹
Andrews University

Postmodernism presents most American conservative evangelical churches with the following challenge and dilemma: If the modernism that was pervasive in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries served as the philosophical and epistemological basis for the formulation and expression of the doctrinal statements and frameworks of most modern American denominations, what happens to those doctrinal frameworks when postmodernism reveals the flaws and fallacies of that modernistic foundation? If those doctrinal frameworks can be salvaged, it can only be, postmoderns would argue, by a significant reworking of them in light of the postmodern critique. How are modern, biblically conservative evangelicals to respond to this challenge?

In good postmodern tradition, we will begin with a narrative. The current state of engagement of conservative evangelical thought with postmodernism can be illustrated by the story of a recent church conference on postmodernism and the mission of the church. The conference was held at Andrews University in October of 2012.² Andrews is operated by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, whose particular doctrinal formulations, like many American denominations, have their roots in the religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century.

Thus, the Andrews conference provides an insight into how broader conservative evangelicalism is grappling with these issues, especially as it was attended by evangelical participants and presenters from a variety of faith traditions. Three major points emerged from the conference that can help guide the church in its future engagements with postmodernism and secularism. The first two points received a general consensus of support, but the third point was contested. It is the disagreement on the third point that provides this article with its focus.

The first point of agreement was that postmodernism is at least two things; the first being an intellectual, ideological approach to reality, often associated most strongly with certain French post-structural intellectuals after World War II, who critiqued the universalist and absolutist claims of

¹Nicholas Miller is a professor of Church History at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University. He dedicates this paper to Dr. Michael Pearson, professor at Newbold College in England, from whom he took his first course in philosophy, which began to open up to him the world of God's other book.

²A description of the conference, the speakers, the papers, and links to audio files of the presentations can be found at <https://revisitingpostmodernism.wordpress.com/>.

modernity associated with the Enlightenment project of seeking for universal and objective truths.

The other thing that postmodernism consists of is a cultural mood, or attitude, that harbors skepticism to all forms of authority, privileges the individual's subjective experiences, and opposes any claim to universal truths or a "meta-narrative" that embraces humanity.

It was acknowledged that many people who have never heard of post-structuralism, Foucault, or Derrida, nevertheless live with a postmodern attitude or perspective. Indeed, this would seem to be the prevailing cultural sense in most centers of education and urbanism in the West, and increasingly in other countries around the world.

The second point of commonality at the conference was that whatever the merits or demerits of postmodernism are as an ideology—and most presenters were quite critical of it—the existence of the cultural form of postmodernism requires a response and recognition from Adventist missions.

As the keynote speaker, Dr. John Stackhouse, put it, like any culture we try to reach, postmodernism has its good points and bad points; but for the missionary, the most important point is that it *is*—and if we want to reach people impacted by it, we must learn to communicate with their concerns, sensitivities, and values in mind. The manner and style with which the biblical message is delivered needs to be revised to make it more relational, modest, and dialogical, at least when targeting postmodern populations.

The third, and more contested, point of the conference was the question of how the church in its mission should respond to the intellectual, substantive claims and critique of postmodernism. There was at least partial agreement on this point. Most participants seemed to accept that postmodernism was relatively accurate in its critique of the excesses of modernity, with its claims to objectivity, absolutism, and universality.

The main point of contention came in relation to how the church should connect its own theology and beliefs to the claims of the postmodern. There were a minority of voices that seemed to be calling for a recasting of Adventist theology and biblical study in light of the claims of postmodernity. These voices argued that Adventist theology was developed in the context of principles of modernism, and that it thus suffers from the same excesses and absolutism of the modern project. Thus, they reasoned, not only the style and approach of message delivery needs adjusting, but the message itself needs modification in light of postmodern insights.

The majority of speakers, though, appeared to reject this approach. As one speaker put it, we need to have churches that are sensitive to the postmodern seeker, but the churches themselves, and the content of their messages, should not become postmodern. Most of the plenary speakers were clear on the point that the Christian gospel does contain a meta-narrative, and that this should not and cannot be denied. The question is how best to communicate it to the postmodern skeptic.

Still, the majority of speakers did not seem to have a clear response to the question raised as to what paradigm alternate to either postmodernism

or modernism the church's message could be framed in. Indeed, one of the main speakers suggested that a number of scholars believe that the Adventist approach to Scripture has been rooted in the Enlightenment suppositions undergirding modernism, thus making it vulnerable to the postmodern critique.³

If all agreed that postmodernism did make an effective critique of modernism, yet most were unwilling to base Adventist theology on postmodernism, where did that leave the church? This question was raised, and there was no clear response. One was left with the sense that we should retreat to some kind of chastened, less aggressive modernism. But no principle was provided that would help distinguish this "humble" modernism from the modernism associated with colonial excesses and wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The message to do modernism better, with more restraint, does not provide enough detail on which to build a system of belief or theology.

This article proposes to help answer the question of what framework of knowledge can be used by Adventists, as well as other conservative evangelicals, to construct their message that avoids the modern/postmodern conundrum. It draws on the history of a philosophical movement that developed in parallel with the foundationalism typically associated with Western modernism.

It was a framework that reached a zenith in later colonial and early republican America; was part of the undergirding of the religious thought of the Second Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century; provided the philosophical framework for the many revival and restorationist groups coming out of that Awakening, including the Adventist church; and then faded from American Protestant thought in the late nineteenth century, and from Adventism in the early part of the twentieth century.⁴

One could call this framework a version of modernism, as it did have Enlightenment influences. But it also had more conventionally religious roots and was really an amalgamation, or coproduction, of certain strands of Enlightenment and religious, typically dissenting Protestant, thought.⁵ It did

³D. J. B. Trim, "Watchmen over the flux of thought: Foucault, Barthes, Derrida, and the historical development of postmodernist philosophy" (paper, presented at the conference "Revisiting Postmodernism: An Old Debate on a New Era," Andrews University, October 18-20, 2012), 20.

⁴This framework has been discussed in overview and general detail in a number of works, such as Mark Noll, *American's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 93-113; Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), 307-362; Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology," *Church History* 24.3 (Sep., 1955): 257-272. These works sketch the general rise and influence of Scottish Common Sense philosophy, though they leave generally unexplored the varying strands of how that thought contributed to both foundationalist and nonfoundationalist epistemologies.

⁵Ahlstrom recognized the varied religious roots of the movement, including

not represent a complete break with the premodern era, but a modification and continuation, and it itself had multiple facets, not all of which were accepted by those groups influenced by it.⁶

But it was distinctly different from twentieth-century modernism so as to not, in my opinion, be susceptible to the main thrust of the postmodern critique. Now, the important practical point here is that if much of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century evangelical theology, including Adventism, was constructed on this *other, alternate* system of early modern thought, then it does not need to radically or even significantly reconstruct or restructure its belief system to take into account the postmodern critique.

Admittedly, there will still need to be some modifications. Certainly, evangelical and Adventist doctrine in the twentieth century has been influenced and even shaped to some degree by the foundationalisms of both the liberal and fundamentalist strands of Christianity. But while this streak of both liberal and fundamentalist modernism exists in Adventism, it is largely an accretion of the early-to-mid-twentieth century. Adventism's underpinnings rest, in my opinion, on a different set of philosophical assumptions.

I. Liberalism and Fundamentalism: Twin Products of Philosophical Foundationalism

Nancey Murphy, in her book *Beyond Liberalism & Fundamentalism: How Modern and Post-Modern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda*, reveals the irony that the apparently warring twentieth-century religious ideologies of theological liberalism and fundamentalism are both based on the same, nonscriptural epistemological basis of Cartesian foundationalism.⁷

Murphy argues that, in essence, the Cartesian ideal is that all knowledge we commit to must be based on "indubitable foundation." It posits knowledge bases that are immune from challenge, absolutely certain, and from which we can build our system of beliefs. The fundamentalists found this absolute basis of certainty *externally* in an inerrant, verbally inspired Bible that they believed could meet this standard of certainty. The liberals found their certainty *internally*, in the individual's religious experiences and feelings. Murphy argues

Thomas Aquinas, Richard Hooker, and John Locke, in "whose shadow the entire movement flourished." Ahlstrom, 259.

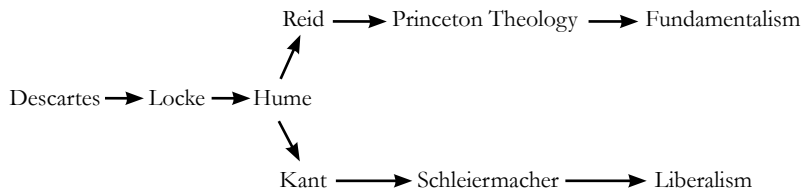
⁶Mark Noll distinguishes epistemological, ethical, and methodological strands within the Common Sense Tradition, with various strands being accepted, emphasized, or rejected by various groups at different times in American history. These distinctions become important below as we explore how different groups impacted by Common Sense moved either away or toward a philosophically foundationalist outlook. Mark A. Noll, "Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought," *American Quarterly* 37, 2 (Summer 1985): 220-223.

⁷Nancy Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism & Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 11-35.

that both the fundamentalist and liberal systems end up misusing the Bible because of their adherence to this problematic philosophical system.

Murphy's framework has helped guide my telling of the story in my church history courses of the rise of modern philosophy and its connection to conservative and liberal Christianity. But in telling this story of Christianity's twentieth-century bifurcation, I believe that Murphy's narrative would be helped by a small modification, an enrichment at least, in the telling of its historical roots. This nuancing of the story opens up space to understand a version of Protestant philosophy that was not quite the same, in my opinion, as the modern foundationalism effectively critiqued by postmodernism.

Murphy includes in her book a simple yet helpful chart that gives a quick historical overview of the development of foundationalism and its relation to modern Christianity. It looks like this:



This chart is very helpful in understanding the common foundationalist roots to the otherwise competing systems of theological fundamentalism and liberalism. But my study of these thinkers has led me to believe that this story can be helpfully complicated a bit, by recognizing a major difference between some of these thinkers over the role that “certainty” plays in reliable knowledge.

II. John Locke, Probabilism and Judgment

In my work on religious liberty, I spent quite a bit of time dealing with John Locke and his works on knowledge and epistemology.⁸ While elements of Locke seem somewhat modern and even foundationalist, he actually differs quite a bit from Descartes and Hume in not emphasizing “the universal, the timeless, the theoretical,” as Murphy describes the foundationalists. Rather, he is much more concerned with the “particular, the timely, the practical,” as Murphy characterizes nonfoundational, premodern thought.⁹

⁸Nicholas Miller, *The Religious Roots of the First Amendment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁹Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism*, 13.

There is one more word that characterized Locke's thought—"probability," which stands in contrast to certainty. As Locke himself put it, "Probability, rather than knowledge, must be our guide in most of the affairs of life. . . . 'Our business here is not to know all things, but those which concern our conduct.' Therefore it is practical knowledge which is the truly valuable part of knowledge."¹⁰ In Locke's view, the objective is not to achieve absolute certainty, but to understand the side on which the balance of evidence lies, and to act accordingly.

This is a very different mode and mindset from that of Descartes. It is not just the rationalist/empiricist divide that separated Locke from Descartes. In addition, Locke also differed with Descartes over that central element of foundationalism, at least as Murphy and others describe it, the need for indubitable foundations, or absolute certainty.

These observations about Locke's non-Cartesian bent toward practicality and probability were underscored by Locke scholar Douglas Casson in his recent book *Liberating Judgment: Fanatics, Skeptics, and John Locke's Politics of Probability*.¹¹ Casson portrays Locke as blazing a middle pathway between the "skepticism of Montaigne and the foundationalism of Descartes."

Both these systems were the opposite sides of the same coin, somewhat like the fundamentalism and liberalism of our day; they were both based on a desire for certainty and led to a "political quietism." Both deferred to traditional authorities, one in the name of the authority of tradition, the other on a belief in a centralized moral certainty.¹²

While the young Locke was something of a traditionalist and absolutist, the more mature Locke avoided both of these extremes by his foray into notions of probability, judgment, and reasonableness.¹³ Locke believed that most belief was that of probability, rather than absolute knowledge. The areas of probability included scientific, moral, and religious beliefs, to which he gave a similar status of probability and reliability. (Ironically, the field of actual knowledge, while very small, included religious beliefs such as the existence of God and His right to receive worship.)

Locke's critical move was to recognize the role of internal judgment in coming to an understanding and acceptance of truth. This role of probability, giving importance to the internal reflections and judgments of each person, is what sets Locke's philosophy quite distinctly apart from Descartes and what I would call the absolute foundationalists.

It was this internal role and deliberation necessary to making judgments about knowledge, I believe, that caused Locke to value freedom of thought and religion as he did. But it also puts him in a different path and trajectory than that of foundationalism as set out by Murphy. Instead, Casson puts Locke in a different genealogy, one going back through a series of Protestant

¹⁰John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, I.I.6.

¹¹(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

¹²Ibid., 21-22.

¹³Miller, *Religious Roots*, 64-67.

thinkers who emphasized notions of the importance of personal, internal judgment, and even experience in matters of religion.

I have previously written about Locke's encounter with the thought of dissenting Protestant thinkers who emphasized the internal role of the Holy Spirit in prompting people to come to religious judgments and decisions. These included Baptists, Quakers, and other Protestant dissenters. While direct cause cannot be proven, it is very interesting that it was during and after being exposed to these ideas of religious judgment that he developed a philosophical version that was very similar to these religious approaches.¹⁴

Casson also sees religious precursors to Locke's thought on probability and judgment. These included the thinkers of the Great Circle of Tew, of which William Chillingworth was a member. Chillingworth was the author of *The Religion of the Protestants*, a work that emphasized the role of private judgment and practical reason in arriving at scriptural truths. Another precursor was Hugo Grotius, the Arminian remonstrant who authored the first modern Christian apologetic, *The Truth of the Christian Religion*. In it, he appealed to the "nondemonstrable facts of history" whereby persons might show the "moral certainty" or "probability" of religious truth.¹⁵

After Locke we have the continuation of the school of probability or practical certainty in the work of Scottish clergyman and philosopher Thomas Reid. Reid was the most notable force behind the school of Scottish Common Sense philosophy; a system that made claims about epistemology, reason, and ethics grounded in common human experience.¹⁶

Reid's view of the practicality of knowledge is captured in the title of "common sense" that is attached to his philosophy. The phrase did not mean that all things widely or commonly believed are true. Rather, it is the view that certain truths about humans and reality must be true for rational discourse to take place at all. Thus these truths must be "common" to all.

These essential truths would include the idea that our perceptions of material things are reasonably reliable, that words convey some kind of meaning, that other rational minds do exist. Without assuming these things, no attempt at rational discourse is possible. Since even those that deny these things, or say that they cannot be proved, use words and discourse to do so, even they assume them to be true. Thus, our senses of these foundational truths are common and shared.¹⁷

¹⁴Miller, *Religious Roots*, 67-72.

¹⁵Ibid., 113.

¹⁶Some important recent works about Reid and his contributions to Scottish Common Sense philosophy include, Terence Cuneo, René van Woudenberg, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); John Haldane, Stephen L. Read, eds., *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid: A Collection of Essays* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁷Ronald E. Beanblossom, ed., *Thomas Reid: Inquiry and Essays* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), xlv-xlvi.

The practical concerns of his system caused him to accept as valuable knowledge that which was less than absolutely certain and fully demonstrable. As one Reid scholar put it, “Reid rejects the claim that we can only be said to know for certain in those cases where it is logically impossible to be mistaken; it is not the case that the only demonstrative knowledge constitutes knowledge.”¹⁸ Another framed it thus: “Epistemologically, it would appear that we know things only on a common sense level with a type of practical certainty, rather than any ‘absolute’ certainty.”¹⁹

Reid himself wrote that “philosophers consider probable evidence, not as a degree, but as a species of evidence, which is opposed, not to certainty, but to another species of evidence, called demonstration.” Reid is particularly concerned to reject Hume’s argument that all knowledge is merely probability, and therefore not true knowledge.²⁰ For these reasons, one Reid scholar has described Reid as “Locke purged and Locke re-created. It is only a mild exaggeration to say that Reid’s system is a critical reconstruction of Locke.”²¹

*III. Modern Probabilism and Scottish Common Sense:
An Alternative to Hard Foundationalism*

Based on these observations about Locke and the stream of probabilism he inherits and transmits, I would propose an alternate or parallel genealogy to that sketched by Murphy. It is one of a modern probabilism that runs parallel with modern foundationalism. This probabilism²² differs from foundationalism in both holding to a different standard of reliability, probability rather than certainty; and also in its willingness to base truths on multiple sources, such as reason, experience, and nature as well as Scripture.

¹⁸Ibid., xlv.

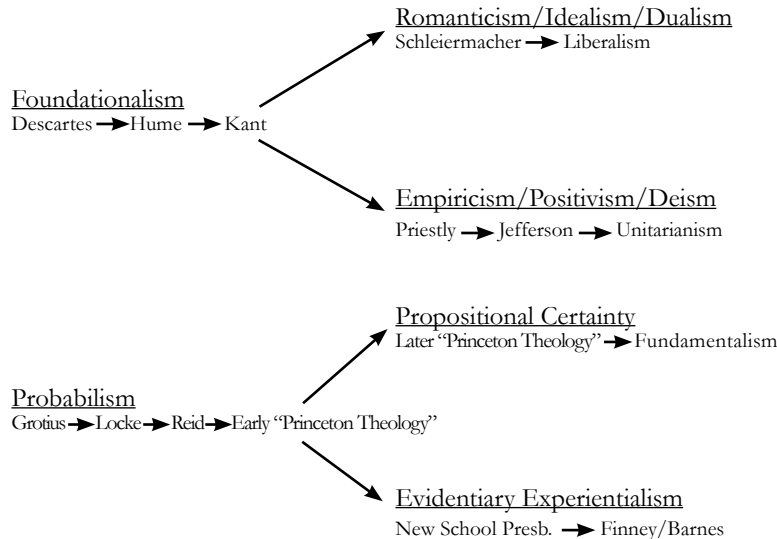
¹⁹Elmer H. Duncan, ed., *Thomas Reid’s Lectures on Natural Theology (1780)* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981), xxxv.

²⁰Ibid., xiv.

²¹G. A. Johnson, “Introduction,” *Selections from the Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense* (Chicago: Open Court, 1915), 15.

²²Some may call it a “soft foundationalism,” but that would be to mischaracterize it. Not only does it differ from traditional foundationalism in its acceptance of probability rather than certainty, but it also allows for multiple sources and resources for truth, versus the one source allowed for by foundationalism, whether it be empiricism, rationalism, or Scripture and revelation.

I would re-draw this historical genealogy to look something like this:



This new chart more accurately reflects that John Locke and Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid were really in significant opposition to many of the central ideas of Hume and Kant, most especially the latter's need for certainty and corresponding denial that moral or value truths could come from examining the natural world. This chart would work better in three dimensions, with the ends curved in a circle to show the empiricism of Priestly and Jefferson approaching near the propositional certainty of the later Princeton school; and the evidentiary experientialists of the New Schoolers abutting the Romantic idealism of Schleiermacher and the liberals.

As Thomas Reid's Common Sense philosophy developed in America, its epistemological strand stayed vital among many and varied religious groups, but its ethical, natural moral philosophy side was in good part rejected by those that developed the nineteenth-century Princeton theology. This rejection of natural sources of truth led to a kind of foundationalism, as the Princeton school embraced a single-source of absolute truth—the verbally-inspired, inerrant Scriptures. This move pushed them towards the foundationalism of the Deists and Unitarians, but with a different foundation, that of Scripture, rather than reason applied to the natural world.

The continued use of ethical Common Sense by the New Haven theologians and New School Presbyterians caused them to continue to value both natural morality and sense experience as a bridge to and supplement for Scripture. This combination, which I term evidentiary experientialism, caused this group to have greater communality with the romantics and idealists. This similarity caused some to see the New School as the forerunners of modern liberal theology. While there may be some overlap between the two groups,

for the most part the New School thinkers continued to embrace natural morality and the truth of Scriptural propositions in a manner very different from that found in idealism, the main source of theological liberalism.

Thus, the top of the chart and the bottom are actually closer to each other than those in the middle, which a three-dimensional chart could show. Further, in putting Locke and Reid in the same row, one must acknowledge that they had some significant differences with each other, especially on the question of ideas in the role of knowledge. But on the point of probability as sufficient for knowledge and beliefs, and on the belief in multiple sources of truth, they were in agreement.

IV. Ethical Scottish Common Sense, Natural Law, and Intuition

An important point that characterizes Scottish common-sense philosophy for Christian theology and thinkers is the validity of knowledge attainable from God's second book of nature. Apart from his works on the philosophy of knowledge and epistemology, Thomas Reid also lectured on the importance of natural theology, or truths about God, morality, and humanity discoverable from observations of the natural world.²³

This view of multiple sources of truth, with one source often confirming or supporting another (intuition, supporting reason, overlapping in places with Scripture) also distinguishes this common sense, probabilistic philosophical approach from Cartesian foundationalism.²⁴

That "absolute certainty" could not be achieved through these probabilistic methods, either for law or ethics, did not prevent their use for both. Unlike either Humean skepticism, or Kantian dualism, the Scottish thinkers continued to posit a connection between the natural world and moral or ethical beliefs and ideas. It is not a coincidence that the eighteenth-century Scottish enlightenment produced some of the primary Protestant works on natural law and natural morality, including those of Thomas Reid, Francis Hutcheson, Lord Kames, and Adam Smith.²⁵

²³Elmer H. Duncan, Ed., *Thomas Reid's Lectures on Natural Theology (1780)* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981).

²⁴An analogy to Scottish common sense ideas in the world of theology would be the Wesleyan quadrilateral, where four sources of authority, scripture, reason, experience, and tradition, mutually support and verify each other in a series of overlapping encounters. The fact that Scripture is the senior partner in the enterprise (*prima scriptura*) and the sole basis of Christian doctrine (*sola scriptura*), cannot obscure the underlying truth that this system is based on an epistemology that shows a belief in multiple sources of truth, in which each source needs the support and affirmation of other sources to be viewed as reliable or verified. Whidden, Woodrow W., "Sola Scriptura, Inerrantist Fundamentalism, and The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Is 'No Creed but The Bible: A Workable Solution?'" *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 35, no. 2 (Autumn 1997), 211-226.

²⁵Thomas Ahnert, *The Moral Culture of the Scottish Enlightenment 1690-1805* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 1-3, 87.

The natural law and rights ideas of Jefferson and Madison in colonial America reflect both Lockean and Scottish Enlightenment views of the meaningfulness of the natural law, of natural rights, which is a kind of morality, that can be derived from that law. But the ideas of Reid and Hutchinson found probably their most influential advocate in America in the form of John Witherspoon, Scottish Presbyterian pastor turned president of the College of New Jersey, the forerunner of Princeton.²⁶

Witherspoon served at early Princeton from 1768-1794, firmly establishing the school in the Scottish enlightenment views of epistemology and natural philosophy. He accomplished this in good part by personally teaching the capstone course, entitled simply “Moral Philosophy,” that all students took in their senior year. In this course, Witherspoon set out a view of morality and ethics that could be understood and supported from reason. As he put it, the class was called moral “*philosophy*, because it is an enquiry into the nature and grounds of moral obligation by reason, as distinct from revelation.”²⁷

Witherspoon’s commitment to a reasoned morality did not “arise from a rejection or disfavor of special revelation.” To the contrary, Witherspoon taught that “the discoveries of reason cannot be contrary to the Bible and that there is nothing certain or valuable in moral philosophy, but what is perfectly coincident with the scripture.”²⁸ But moral philosophy was a vital addition to Scripture, because it provided the framework, the web, which could connect all the disciplines outside divinity, whether it be political science, or history, or the natural sciences, to the larger world of moral concepts.

This common-sense-based moral philosophy became the working undercarriage of the Protestant educational enterprise in late-eighteenth, and early- to mid-nineteenth-century America. It was characterized by three things, two of which we have already discussed. The first was what we might call the probabilistic, wholistic nature of reliable knowledge. This view denied that an objective, absolute certainty on most matters relating to life and faith was practical or even possible. Rather, it argued for a reliability, a practical assurance, supported by certain evidences, but which also was supported by our reason, experience, as well as moral and common sense.

The second characteristic flowed from the first, and was what we might call the wholistic nature of reality. This was shown in the reliabilist’s willingness to accept and consider truth claims from a variety of sources, including

²⁶A discussion of Witherspoon’s impressive career in outline and his influence on Princeton and America can be found in Jeffrey H. Morrison, *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005); George Eugene Rich, *John Witherspoon: His Scottish Intellectual Background* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1964); L. H. Butterfield, *John Witherspoon Comes to America: A Documentary Account Based Largely on New Materials* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953).

²⁷Mark A. Noll, *Princeton and the Republic: 1768-1822* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2004), 45.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 45.

Scripture, reason, experience, moral sense, etc. This made the possibility of both moral philosophy and natural law possible for a people who otherwise had a very high regard for Scripture, and might be willing to make Scripture the only source for spiritual and moral truths. They understood that God had a second book, nature, which included the world, as well as human nature and experience, through which moral principles could also be discerned.

These first two points led to a third point, which eventually split the early Protestant Common Sense consensus in the United States, and led in part, in my view, to the development of fundamentalism. This third point was a doctrinal point that flowed from the first two points. If God could communicate reliable truths through multiple sources, then one could use these sources to understand claims made by the Bible about God. If the Bible said that God was just, and moral, then He could be understood to be just and moral by standards of morality and justice accessible by human reason generally.

This conception that human reason in reflecting on nature could discern basic moral truths, if only in crude outline, allowed for the development of a theological view or system called the moral government of God. This system was rooted in the free-will theology of Jacob Arminius, and was developed by one of his disciples, the legal great and Christian apologist, Hugo Grotius. It built on Arminius' desire to invoke human freedom, not in order to build up human prestige or autonomy, but to defend God's honor and character in not being the author of evil. Free will became the firewall, as it were, that prevented God from being tagged, or vilified, as the cause and originator of evil.²⁹

Grotius built on this insight to talk about a moral government of God, which needed to preserve God's reputation for justice, which was the basis of the long-term stability of his government, while also allowing him to be merciful in forgiving sinners. He developed a theory of the atonement, whereby God is not concerned about his personal honor or prestige, but rather about the integrity of the government that He oversees. It is God in His role as ruler of the universe that must provide a consistent oversight to His system of laws upon which the universe depends.³⁰

The Moral Government of God was an attractive model for those influenced by Arminius, and early supporters of it included John Milton, John Wesley, and Thomas Reid himself. Milton, as a young man, had met and stayed with Grotius briefly in Paris, and admired his works. His *Paradise Lost*, of course, was written with the specific purpose to "Justify the ways

²⁹Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 467.

³⁰Hugo Grotius, *A Defence of the Catholic Faith Concerning the Satisfaction of Christ against Faustus Socinus*, trans. and introduction, Frank Hugh Foster (Andover, MA: Warren F. Draper, 1889).

of God to men,” a theme that assumes that God operates a just, fair, moral government.³¹

Samuel Wesley, John Wesley’s father, viewed Hugo Grotius as his favorite biblical commentator, and he recommended him to John. The writings of Grotius came to be a great theological resource for Wesley and his “Methodist” friends at Oxford University.³² Methodism, which had a free will bent, and which was influenced by the thought of Arminius and Grotius, continued to develop its theology of God’s justice, atonement, and restoration around the Moral Government of God model.³³

Despite coming from a Calvinist, reformed background, Thomas Reid’s Moral Government framework assumed that humans were moral, accountable beings who possessed capacity for voluntary behavior and free will. It was these voluntary, human wills that, for Reid, shielded God from accusations of being the originator of evil.³⁴

Reid specifically developed arguments about the Moral Government of God in his lectures on natural theology.³⁵ For Reid, a moral nature was central to God’s being, and this expressed itself in “the Moral Government of God.”³⁶ “In His Moral Government,” Reid wrote, “he acts like a Legislator, who proposes rules of conduct to his subjects and as they obey or disobey them so may they expect his favor or displeasure.”³⁷

The reformed tradition, Reid notwithstanding, tended to be resistant to Moral Government claims, as they believed that it inappropriately elevated human will and reason. But under the influence of Scottish Common Sense philosophy and Reid, the Moral Government of God idea began to be adopted by some prominent Calvinist thinkers in late eighteenth-century America. The logic of the movement caused these reformed thinkers to begin to modify notions of human choice and free will in regards to salvation.

The movement within American Calvinism began to coalesce in certain reformed thinkers through the efforts of successors to Jonathan Edwards, such as Joseph Bellamy and Jonathan Edwards, Jr. It was given its most

³¹Anniina Jokinen, “Life of John Milton,” *Luminarium*, June 21, 2006, Accessed on February 27, 2015, <http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/milton/miltonbio.htm>.

³²Richard P. Heitzenrater, ed., *Diary of an Oxford Methodist: Benjamin Ingham, 1733-34* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985).

³³Wesley was a strong supporter of the natural theology or religion espoused by Bishop Butler in his famed *Analogy of Religion: Natural and Revealed*, a work that Thomas Reid also endorsed. Elton M. Hendricks, “John Wesley and Natural Theology,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 18, no. 2 (Fall 1983): 12-13; American Methodist theologian Richard Watson continued to develop the Moral Government of God theme in his *Theological Institutes; or a View of the Evidences, Doctrines, Morals, and Institutions of Christianity* (New York: J. Emory and B. Waugh, 1831), 254 (emphasis added).

³⁴*Ibid.*, 101-102.

³⁵Duncan, *Thomas Reid’s Lectures on Natural Theology*, 72-73, 94-95, 117-120.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 72, 82-84, 117.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 117.

formal and extended expression, however, through the theological teachings and writings of Nathaniel Taylor, a Yale Professor of Divinity in the early nineteenth century.³⁸

Taylor, a member of the Congregationalist church, modified Calvinist views of human will and the atonement to allow for Christ's sacrifice to make provision for all, and for all humans to have the possibility to choose it. His great theme, and the title of his collected lectures, was *The Moral Government of God*.³⁹

While Taylor is not a common name today, he had influence beyond Congregationalism, and impacted a sufficient number of Presbyterians to give rise to what has been termed New School Presbyterianism. Another leading figure associated with this movement was Charles Finney, the lawyer turned evangelist. Finney spearheaded much of the revivalism of the later part of the Second Great Awakening, and helped found Oberlin College.⁴⁰ Another expositor of views like Taylor's was the widely popular Biblical commentator Albert Barnes, whose Biblical commentaries sold a million copies by the 1870s.⁴¹

The revivalism of the Second Great Awakening, and the modification of Calvinism away from strict determinism and a limited atonement, caused a pushback from various Calvinist theologians against a philosophy that they felt gave too much room for the role of human reason and moral sentiment. A number of these scholars were based at Princeton.

Historian Mark Noll documents the shifting emphasis in philosophy over time at Princeton, from Archibald Alexander, who stays with Witherspoon's emphasis on Scottish common sense ideas, to Charles Hodge, who opposes Finney's revivalism and free will, and criticizes Finney's use of reason and appeal to common sense notions of freedom and responsibility. Hodge does not overtly reject Scottish common-sense principles, and continues to use what Mark Noll calls epistemological Common Sense.⁴²

Epistemological Common Sense is the view that "our perceptions reveal the world pretty much as it is and are not merely 'ideas' impressed upon our mind." Hodge begins to reject, however, what Noll calls ethical common sense, "the assertion that just as humans know intuitively some basic realities

³⁸George Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003; originally published by Yale University Press, 1970), 38-39.

³⁹Ibid., 48-51.

⁴⁰Ibid., 76-80.

⁴¹Ibid., 27, 52-55.

⁴²Mark A. Noll, "Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought" *American Quarterly* 37, no. 2. (Summer 1985): 220-221; the continued use of epistemological Common Sense at Princeton into the early twentieth century is documented by Darryl G. Hart, "The Princeton Mind in the Modern World and the Common Sense of J. Gresham Machen," *WTJ*, 46 (1984), 1-25.

of the physical world, so they know by the nature of their own being certain foundational principles of morality.”⁴³

Moving away from this view that morality can be known at all from the natural world, Hodge retreats to a use of reason tied almost exclusively to Scripture to understand and know morality. He began to view with great skepticism the deliverances of moral instinct and common sense that had been part of ethical Common Sense teaching.

This tendency towards a more limited, confining, and absolute source of truth was enhanced by Hodge’s successors, his son, Archibald Hodge, and theologian Benjamin Warfield. It was Hodge and Warfield together who, in seeking for a firmer and more foundational source of truth, developed the theory of the verbal inerrancy view of Scriptural inspiration that came to dominate fundamentalism in the early twentieth century.⁴⁴

This reaction against the New Haven theology and New School Presbyterians pushed the “Old School” Princetonians away from the experiential evidentialism of the Scottish common sense school, which appreciated multiple sources of truth, and relied on a practical probability rather than an absolute certainty. It moved them toward a foundationalism more akin to the empiricists and positivists of the rising scientism. The difference was, of course, that the object of study would not be the natural world, but Scripture, which would be susceptible to the methods and rigor of science.

This story is well told by George Marsden in his classic work on *Fundamentalism and American Culture*. What is less well known is the story of the successors of the New Haven and New School Presbyterian theologies, those that did not buy into the foundationalist, verbal inerrancy of Scripture as the increasingly exclusive source of moral teaching.

This middle group became increasingly overshadowed by the fundamentalist/liberal split of the early twentieth century. Groups felt forced to choose up sides between the growing extremes, and many of them were pushed onto the foundationalist extremes of either empiricist/experiential liberalism or propositional/verbalist fundamentalism. My study of Adventist history and theology convinces me that Adventists were one of the groups that inherited and worked, at least initially, from this alternate, middle path.⁴⁵

The Adventist heritage on this matter can be seen in the three areas discussed above: reliability, multiple truth sources, and God’s Moral Government. Importantly, each of these three topics were somewhat

⁴³Noll, “Common Sense Traditions,” 220-221.

⁴⁴Mark Noll, ed., *The Princeton Theology: 1812-1921* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1983, 2001), 30-33, 165-166, 218-220; the split between the New School’s continuing embrace of the ethical elements of the Scottish philosophy and Old Princeton’s growing concern over its experiential, subjective elements have also been noted by Tim McConnel, “The Old Princeton Apologetics: Common Sense or Reformed?” *JETS* 46.4 (December 2003): 647-72, 649-650.

⁴⁵George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980, 2006).

obscured for much of the twentieth century as Adventism fell into an orbit very close to Old-Princeton-influenced fundamentalism. It then reacted against that in the 1970s, with portions of the church heading for liberal, or at least neo-orthodox, positions.

Let's consider these areas in turn by looking at some examples from one of Adventism's primary founders, Ellen White. If we take them in reverse order, we start with the Moral Government of God theology. It is not surprising that Ellen White should be sympathetic to the Moral Government of God view, given her Methodist, Arminian roots. What is unusual and quite interesting, though, is her strong connection with the New School Presbyterian advocates of it.

Arthur White, Ellen White's son, wrote this of Ellen White: "as the year 1900 opened, Ellen White was dividing her time and strength between the evangelistic interest at Maitland [in Australia] and her literary work. With this in mind on January 1, 1900, she wrote to Edson calling for her library to be sent to Australia."⁴⁶ This is what she wrote:

I have sent for four or five large volumes of Barnes' notes on the Bible. I think they are in Battle Creek in my house now sold, somewhere with my books. I hope you will see that my property, if I have any, is cared for and not scattered as common property everywhere. I may never visit America again, and my best books should come to me when it is convenient.⁴⁷

Given that she viewed Barnes' commentaries as among her "best books," it is not surprising that they had some shared views. The views that Barnes expresses in his commentary on Romans with the concept of the atonement being explained in terms of God's Moral Government is very similar to that found in Ellen White. It is not to say that Ellen White got it from Barnes. Indeed, it may have been that he was one of her favorite commentators because his conceptions in this regard were very similar to hers. Here is one quote as an example:

In the gift of his Son as a substitute and surety for fallen man, is an everlasting testimony to the world, to the heavenly universe, and to worlds unfallen, of the sacred regard which God has for the *honor of his law* and the eternal stability of his own *moral government*. It was also an expression of his love and mercy for the fallen human race. In the plan of redemption, this Saviour was to bring glory to God by making manifest his love for the world.⁴⁸

Ellen White's comprehensive Great Controversy theme is an expansion and re-focusing of the Moral Government of God construct developed by Grotius, Taylor, Barnes and others. White re-focuses it to the point where it has two centers, the main one being God's love, though she never loses sight of his justice and morality. After Ellen White, one might call it God's Moral Government of Love.

⁴⁶Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White*, Vol. 4: *The Australian Years, 1891-1900* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1983), 448.

⁴⁷Ellen G. White, Letter 189, 1900.

⁴⁸Ellen G. White, *The Youth's Instructor*, August 5, 1897, Paragraph 4.

Modern oversight of the governmental aspects of God's moral nature causes confusion in the Adventist church over issues like the nature of the atonement and the centrality of theodicy to questions about creation, evolution, and suffering. A restoration of the full picture of God's Moral Government would help us more effectively deal with these issues as a church.

Ellen White was also very conscious and clear on the second point of wholistic probabilism, and that is the wholistic nature of reality. She was no dualist, and was constantly commenting on the connection between the natural and spiritual worlds, whether it was the laws of nature in regards to physical and mental health, or the laws of nature and morality. Far from being a Bible-only moralist, she advocated for the study of the Protestant system of moral philosophy.

In this regard she wrote:

The plans devised and carried out for the education of the youth are none too broad. They should not have a one-sided education, but all their powers should receive equal attention. Moral philosophy, the study of Scriptures, and physical training should be combined with the studies usually pursued in schools.⁴⁹

Many Adventists reading this statement quickly and carelessly will assume that White is referring to the moral philosophy found in the Bible. But the list of items is obviously in the disjunctive, as physical training is certainly different from scriptural or moral study. Further, in the nineteenth century, the course on moral philosophy, as it had been in John Witherspoon's time, was taught in most Protestant colleges "as the capstone course of the senior year of collegiate instruction," often by the president. It was widely understood as being the study of morals from sources of knowledge outside the scriptures.⁵⁰

Despite this inspired injunction that "moral philosophy" should be one of the three main things studied in Adventist schools, twentieth-century Adventism generally joined fundamentalism in rejecting any meaningful study of moral philosophy in the twentieth century. This means that our biblical moral insights became marooned on an island that could only be reached by people that shared our commitment to Scripture. It also in good part disconnected the study of the sciences and humanities from the moral philosophical web that previously connected them with the study of divinities.

This is in part the reason for the wrestling match that takes place in Adventist colleges and universities between the theology departments and those of the sciences, sociology, psychology, history, and other humanities. The common vocabulary of moral reasoning and discourse has been

⁴⁹Ellen G. White, *Christian Education* (Battle Creek, MI: International Tract Society, 1894), 210.

⁵⁰Allen C. Guelzo, "'The Science of Duty': Moral Philosophy and the Epistemology of Science in Nineteenth Century America," in David Livingstone, D. G. Hart, Mark Noll, eds., *Evangelicals and Science in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 267-269, 271.

largely lost, and the disciplines have settled onto their general philosophical underpinnings created by their secular professional and scholarly counterparts.

The third and final point, that of not requiring an objective, rigid certainty, was seen in Adventism's refusal to accept, at least ostensibly, the theory of biblical verbal inerrancy. Despite being a conservative denomination, with literal views of creation, Adventism did not accept, in good part due to Ellen White's warnings, the theory of verbal dictation. I say ostensibly, because in their twentieth-century brush with fundamentalism, many Adventists accepted the practice of operating and defending a kind of verbal inerrancy, even while denying the theory.

This failure to continue with a wholistic, practical view of certainty was the primary reason that views of inspiration of the Bible as well as that of Ellen White were rigid and unrealistic in mid-twentieth-century Adventism. It was this artificial view of inspiration that in turn led into the disillusionment of many in the 1970s when confronted with the truths of the operation of inspiration. It was this that pushed a portion of educated Adventists into liberal or at least neo-orthodox camps.

In many ways, we still live with the fallout of that conflict in the seventies between these two extremes. This is compounded with the challenge of postmodernism, which seems to critique both extremes as being based on a non-biblical, philosophically untenable, foundationalism. And indeed, the extremes are so based. But this critique generally overlooks the other philosophical pathway to which Adventism is truly heir, the evidentiary, wholistic probabilism of Reid, Witherspoon, Taylor, Barnes, and Ellen White.

This is not a call to return to Scottish common-sense realism. One cannot truly return to philosophies of the past that were constructed to deal with the assumptions, problems, and cultures of their own time. But there are aspects of that past that can be imported into a neo-holistic realism. The points of practical certainty, wholistic moral reasoning based on multiple sources subject to Scripture, and a concern for the moral government of God, can help guide both our philosophical and theological thinking as we continue to deal with the challenges of modernity and postmodernity. The pathway ahead is not the same as the one behind, but we can continue to be guided by its way markers—as a surveyor keeps one eye on his prior positioning stakes as he continues to move forward to his ultimate goal.