

Philip Schaff: The Flow of Church History and the Development of Protestantism

David R. Bains

Samford University, USA

Theodore Louis Trost

University of Alabama, USA

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Abstract

Arriving from Germany in 1844, Philip Schaff used his inaugural lecture as professor at the theological seminary in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, to set forth his understanding of church history with particular reference to the role of Protestantism in the church's ongoing development. A comprehensive, albeit fairly standard account from the point of view of German learning, Schaff's address engendered surprise, admiration in some quarters, and cries of "heresy" in others. This essay expounds Schaff's *The Principle of Protestantism* as the basis upon which he established himself as both a church historian and a progenitor of the Mercersburg movement. Drawing on responses to the address, it identifies the distance between Schaff's conceptions and those of leading American Reformed theologians. It also makes preliminary suggestions concerning the enduring relevance of Schaff's work for contemporary theology and theories of religion.

Keywords

ecclesiology, ecumenism, Mercersburg Theology, Philip Schaff, church history, theories of religion, mediating theology, Reformed theology, Protestantism, organic development

Corresponding author:

David R. Bains, Department of Religion, Samford University, 800 Lakeshore Drive, Birmingham, AL 35229, USA.

Email: drbains@samford.edu

In his 2006 book *Crossing and Dwelling*, Thomas Tweed develops a theory of religion that draws on metaphors of aquatic flow to express religions' dynamic character.¹ A similar strategy was employed over 160 years earlier by church historian Philip Schaff, who brought to the precincts of promise and industry that was nineteenth-century America a theory of church history shaped by German scholarship. In his initial American writings, Schaff offered his most systematic reflections on the process of history and thus the nature of Protestantism and the church. In collaboration with John Nevin, who translated and introduced Schaff's early work, the Mercersburg movement was set in motion.

Schaff complemented Nevin's polemics against the subjective and individualistic character of nineteenth-century American Protestantism with a notion of a churchly "main stream" flowing forth from the life of Christ, through the Roman Catholic Church, into the Reformation, and onwards toward the consummation of time. This conception of the church's developing or fluid character shaped Schaff's career as a historian and ecumenical leader and was his major contribution to the Mercersburg Theology. This essay examines key features of Schaff's ecclesiology as presented in his early writings, focusing in particular on *The Principle of Protestantism*. It demonstrates the distinctive nature of the emerging Mercersburg Theology by examining other Americans' responses to it. It concludes by considering the relationship of Schaff's ecclesiology to Tweed's conception of religions as processes, not substances.

The principle of Protestantism

According to his later recollections, when Philip Schaff came from Berlin in 1844 to become professor of church history and biblical literature at the German Reformed seminary in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, he had little expectation that his inaugural lecture would be controversial.² Schaff's mentors had encouraged him to accept this appointment in order to bring "German theological scholarship" to the German-American church so it could make its "peculiar contribution" to American life.³ Choosing as his subject "The Principle of Protestantism and its relation to the present posture of the church, particularly in the United States," he sought to articulate what he knew about Protestant identity and to bring this German perspective to bear upon the contemporary state of

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1. Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2006).
 2. Philip Schaff, "Farewell Address to the Eastern Synod of the Reformed Church in the United States [1892]," *Philip Schaff: Historian and Ambassador of the Universal Church*, ed. Klaus Penzel (Macon, GA: Mercer, 1991), 6.
 3. Isaac Dorner to Schaff, 1843, quoted in Schaff, *America: A Sketch of Its Political, Social and Religious Character*, ed. Perry Miller (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1961), xvi.

American Christianity.⁴ Schaff assumed he shared these ideas in common with the assembled members of the German Reformed Church. Still, almost every aspect of his lecture presented a potential point of controversy in a religious culture that differed significantly from the one across the sea. Conflict and accusations of heresy followed immediately.⁵

The motivating issue behind Schaff's address was what he and his German contemporaries called "the Church Question": What is the true church? How is it to be ordered and related to other aspects of society, including the state, the arts, and culture? The church question had been central to Schaff's education and continued to preoccupy his early career as reflected in both the *Principle of Protestantism* and his second major work, *What Is Church History?*⁶ Schaff's ecclesiology, his theological understanding of church history as developed in relation to his incarnational Christology, is articulated in both of these writings and constitutes his foundational theological contribution to the Mercersburg Theology.

In unity with other proponents of a "high church" theology, Schaff insisted that the church must be seen not simply as a gathering of like-minded Christians, but as a divinely constituted, historical institution.⁷ But in contrast to the other major American movements concerned with the nature of the church (including Roman Catholics, Restorationists, Landmark Baptists, Mormons, and high-church Episcopalians), Schaff saw it neither as strictly bounded to one institution, such as the Church of Rome, nor to a static orthodoxy, whether that of Calvinist Westminster, or Lutheran Augsburg. Instead, the church was a flowing stream or developing organism whose course had been shaped by Rome, Augsburg, Westminster, and even some dissenting sects. He believed that through it all, and despite misadventures, the kingdom of God was growing toward fruition.

4. Schaff, *The Principle of Protestantism*, ed. Bard Thompson and George H. Bricker (Philadelphia: United Church, 1964), 56. A new critical edition of this work is forthcoming in *The Church in History*, vol. 3, of the Mercersburg Theology Study Series (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock).

5. George H. Shriver, "Heresy at Mercersburg," *American Religious Heretics*, ed. Shriver (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966), 18–55. Other works that examine Schaff's early career include James Hastings Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology: Nevins and Schaff at Mercersburg* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961); George H. Shriver, *Philip Schaff: Christian Scholar and Ecumenical Prophet* (Macon, GA: Mercer, 1987); Stephen Ray Graham, *Cosmos in the Chaos: Philip Schaff's Interpretation of Nineteenth-Century American Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); Gary K. Pranger, *Philip Schaff (1819–1893): Portrait of an Immigrant Theologian* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997); Theodore Louis Trost, "Exposing, Experiencing, and Explaining America: Philip Schaff's Progress from *The Principle of Protestantism* to *America*," *The New Mercersburg Review* 23 (Spring 1998): 3–24; Klaus Penzel, *The German Education of Christian Scholar Philip Schaff: The Formative Years, 1819–1844* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 2004).

6. Penzel, *German Education*, 87–124; Schaff, *What Is Church History? A Vindication of the Idea of Historical Development* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1846). A new critical edition is forthcoming in *The Church in History*.

7. E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale, 2003), 245–51, 276–78, 298–301, 331–40, 408–14, 415–33.

The Principle of Protestantism begins with a retrospective look at the Reformation, in which Schaff quickly comes to his most arresting claim, namely that the Reformation was “the legitimate offspring, the greatest act of the Catholic church.”⁸ Protestantism was not grounded in the rejection of Catholicism any more than Christianity rejected Judaism. Rather like the relationship of Christianity to Judaism, Protestantism was the fulfillment of Catholicism, the next stage in the historical development of the church.⁹

Schaff insisted upon this organic connection between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism for several reasons, each rooted in his formation in Germany under a somewhat eclectic group of mentors including Ludwig von Gerlach, Ernst Hengstenberg, Friedrich Schelling, and August Neander.¹⁰ First, he thought it was necessary for the vindication of Protestantism against its critics. Schaff pointed to Christ’s promise to remain with his church, “even to the end of the world.”¹¹ Since Christ is true to his word, he must have been present in the Catholic church, for, Schaff insisted, modern historical studies showed that Catholicism had been “the chief, if not the only bearer of Christianity” through the middle ages.¹² Here Schaff places himself in opposition to Anabaptists, Spiritualists, and Restorationists who would leap over the entire history of the Catholic church to recapture a pristine apostolic Christianity. For Schaff, New Testament Christianity was determinative, but only in the sense that seed and tree are related. Any adequate conception of the church must be true to both Scripture and history.

This leads to a second point. Christianity was not a mystical withdrawal from history, Schaff insisted, but a highly visible movement through history toward the day when Christ would be “all in all” (Col 3:11). The church is an organic development in which each useful reformation must “grow forth from the trunk of history, in regular living union with its previous development.”¹³ The embracing of this principle was the particular vocation of heirs of the Reformation, for “Protestantism is the principle of movement, of progress in the history of the church.”¹⁴ This forward movement was not narrowly limited to the church. Rather since “Christianity is the redemption and renovation of the world,” the church must relate itself to all aspects of society, including art, science, philosophy and government, in order to make “*all things new*.”¹⁵ It is precisely in

8. Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 73.

9. *Ibid.*, 71.

10. Penzel, *German Education*, 116.

11. Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 59. In his famous Berlin lectures of 1841–42, Schelling makes a similar point and alludes to the same passage, Matthew 28.20. See Klaus Penzel, “An Ecumenical Vision of Church History: F.W.J. Schelling,” *Perkins School of Theology Journal* 17 (1964): 3–19.

12. Schaff, “German Theology and the Church Question,” *Mercersburg Quarterly Review* 4 (January 1853): 135.

13. Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 57.

14. *Ibid.*, 201.

15. *Ibid.*, 173.

this endeavor to move toward the day when Christ would be “all in all” that Schaff counsels Protestants to learn from the Catholic tradition, for in the middle ages Christianity appeared as the “all-moving, all-ruling force.”¹⁶

This suggests a third factor in Schaff’s understanding of Protestantism and Catholicism: no historical activity is fruitless because history progresses dialectically. Schaff borrowed his philosophy of church history from his teachers August Neander, F.C. Baur, and of course, ultimately G.W.F. Hegel. Opposing forces competed to direct the church’s course, diverting it and perhaps even carrying it backwards for a while. But forward progress was maintained in the mainstream, in the waters that run deep and to which the shallow waters of opposing shores eventually must return. Schaff located the reforming principle that gave birth to Protestantism in this “main stream” that flows “midway, or through the deep, rather, between two extremes.” Neither a revolutionary overthrow nor a simple restoration of what was lost, reformation results in the birth of something new.¹⁷

Following Friederich Schelling, Schaff used apostolic types to designate the dominant tendencies of each period of church history.¹⁸ Roman Catholicism was the “Church of Peter” in which mere obedience to law came to define religious life. While occurring throughout the history of the church, the reaction against legalism was institutionalized in the “Church of Paul,” or Protestantism.¹⁹ But with its emphasis on freedom, or grace, Protestantism, too, risked distortion. When laws retain no objective force, a one-sided “loose subjectivism” ensued resulting in anti-nomianism and atomism—conditions Schaff believed dominated American Christianity.

Schaff saw Christianity moving toward a balance of these tendencies, toward the “Church of John”: where love would be the rule of faith and the extreme fronts of both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism would co-mingle and flow back into the mainstream. Churches that separated themselves from the constant “historical movement” of this “mainstream” would stagnate and waste away in dead formalism. Groups that were in this state of decay included, according to Schaff, the Eastern Orthodox church, certain Protestant sects such as the Dunkers, and those portions of the Roman church not vivified by regular interaction with Protestantism.²⁰

The dialectical process was central to Schaff’s epistemology; he saw it at work everywhere. Thus the reaction against Protestant orthodoxy (a one-sided objectification of confessional statements) was evident in such movements as Pietism and rationalism. In historiography, the “orthodox” school rightly insisted on continuity in the church’s life, but wrongly found it in unchangeable doctrinal

16. *Ibid.*, 175.

17. *Ibid.*, 57.

18. Penzel, *German Education*, 119–20; Penzel, “An Ecumenical Vision of Church History”; Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 216–18; Schaff, “German Theology,” 142–43.

19. Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 77.

20. Schaff, *What Is Church History?*, 106–107.

formulas. The “rationalist” school rightly affirmed that doctrine was moving and flowing, but wrongly saw this to be simply “the lawless play of caprice.”²¹ The “modern” school that Schaff endorsed, however, synthesized these positions in affirming organic development: change guided by the spirit of Christ. Similarly, Schaff predicted a synthesis of qualities in the emerging “Anglo-German” in America: a combining of the German character, which was contemplative and theory-oriented, with the practical, action-oriented English character.²²

This dialectical approach shaped Schaff’s discussion of the very principle of Protestantism. He subdivided it into two. The “formal principle” was Protestantism’s emphasis on the primacy of Scripture. The message of Scripture provided the more important “material principle,” the doctrine of justification by faith through grace.²³ These two principles, according to Schaff, “are inseparably joined as contents and form, will and knowledge, and strictly taken constitute but two sides of the same maxim: Christ in all.”²⁴ But, as he was quick to point out, extremism enters into the Protestant community and distortions arise. Justification without a searching of the Scripture tends toward narrow orthodoxy. Scripture alone, without justification, leads to individualized interpretations.²⁵

Likewise he critiqued both nineteenth-century Protestantism’s sectarianism and the most prominent attempt to cure it. Sectarianism arose from the distortion of Protestantism’s emphasis on freedom and Schaff found it especially pronounced in America—with its “free institutions and the separation of church from the state.”²⁶ Schaff blamed the problem on what he called Puritanism—the guiding force behind most American Protestantism (here he probably meant “congregationalism” as a form of church polity or voluntarism as a social option). Ultimately, Puritanism led to “full atomism.” Against the flow of history toward union, it asserted isolation; it mistook a part for the whole; and it denied organic connection to the living stream of the church by maintaining no historical connection to the communion of saints—or other contemporary Christian communities—through confession or creed. Schaff went so far as to

21. Schaff, *What Is Church History?*, 82.

22. Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 232–34

23. Klaus Penzel traces the origin of these categories to K.G. Bretschneider, *Handbuch der Dogmatik der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (1814; 4th ed., 1838). See Penzel, *Philip Schaff*, 76, n. 4.

24. Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 122.

25. Schaff criticizes various groups who had, in his opinion, left the mainstream of Protestant orthodoxy: “All sects . . . which either deny justification by faith alone, as the Scocians, Unitarians, and Swedenborgians, or reject the written word, as the Schwenkenfeldians and the Quakers, are to be excluded from the territory of orthodox Protestantism, however they may claim to belong to it and to stand in its connection.” *Principle of Protestantism*, 122. He softens this position significantly before publishing *America* in 1854.

26. Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 140.

insist that “Puritanism” was unbiblical: “John 17 inflicts the death blow on the *whole* sectarian and denominational system.”²⁷

In the controversial Anglo-Catholic movement led by Edward B. Pusey, John H. Newman, and others, Schaff saw an effort to cure the disease. It represented “an entirely legitimate reaction against rationalistic and sectarian pseudo-Protestantism, as well as the religious subjectivity of the so-called Low church party.”²⁸ But it was a misdirected reaction. It tried to find its legitimating authority in a legalistic, apostolic succession of bishops. “This is the old leaven of the Pharisees!” Schaff declared.²⁹ He respected the movement for what it was trying to accomplish, but it sacrificed too much. It sought a restoration of the church of the church fathers, thereby utterly misapprehending “the significance of the Reformation [and] the entire Protestant period of the church.” Contrary to the claims of its leading lights, it fatally lacked “the true idea of development altogether.”³⁰

Protestantism, according to Schaff, was the champion of both the primacy of the Scriptures and the forward movement of the church. Historical development in the church “consists in an apprehension, always more and more profound, of the life and doctrine of Christ and his apostles” expressed in Scripture.³¹ Here Schaff pointed to the importance of creeds. They were essentially commentaries on the content of Scripture. As such they were not “an independent source of revelation, but the one fountain of the written word, only rolling itself forward in the stream of church consciousness.”³²

In concluding his address, Schaff anticipated an American Protestantism that would be historically grounded, one that would absorb the various sects as they served out their corrective purposes and flowed back into the mainstream. “The future belongs to union,” Schaff said—perhaps with a nod to the church of the Prussian Union into which he was ordained.³³ And he foresaw this union within the church first of all as a sign to the world of the kingdom of God. From this point of view, Protestantism could not be consummated without Catholicism; the “truth of both tendencies [must] be actualized as the power of one and the same life in the

27. *Ibid.*, 152. Given the nature of this preliminary assessment, at least, it is ironic that Schaff’s denomination would subsequently merge with the New England Congregational Christian Churches one hundred or so years later to form the United Church of Christ (1957). Or perhaps Schaff would see this union as an inevitable consequence of historical development.

28. Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 157.

29. *Ibid.*, 161.

30. *Ibid.*, 160. Like Schaff’s *Principle of Protestantism*, John Henry Newman’s *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* was published in 1845. For Schaff’s initial response to it see *What Is Church History?*, 46–48.

31. Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 76.

32. *Ibid.*, 116. Schaff would later publish *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, 3 vols. (New York: Harper, 1877).

33. Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 194.

full revelation of the kingdom of God.”³⁴ Thus Schaff anticipated the emergence of an “Evangelical Catholicism” in the New World, a magnificent union that would complete in the nineteenth century the Reformation that was begun in the sixteenth century.³⁵

Critical reception from the reformed in America

The juxtaposition of “Evangelical” and “Catholic” was a bold one to make on American soil. Indeed, after suspicions arose in response to Schaff’s original German address, John Nevin seemed obliged to address the dangers of Roman Catholicism at least in the footnotes to his English translation of *The Principle of Protestantism*. Toward the end of his discourse, Schaff extended his broad view of the church to include contemporary Catholics: “Let them go on to treat us as lost heretics; we must still return good for evil.”³⁶ While drawn to this ideal, Nevin acknowledged a general suspicion about Catholic advances in American culture, noting “with how much quiet, unaffected confidence [the Catholic church] is pursuing a course that looks confessedly to nothing less than the spiritual conquest of the whole land.”³⁷ This was a concern that Schaff as immigrant did not yet share with his American brethren who were living through a dramatic change in the demographics of their nation. Furthermore, Schaff may not have known about recent riots in nearby Philadelphia that resulted in several deaths and the destruction of two Catholic churches.³⁸ These tensions played a role in the reception of Schaff’s work from reviewers on both sides of the Delaware River.

Charles Hodge, the renowned professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, had studied in Germany and was well aware of the German trends in historical and theological scholarship. Distrusting the admixture of Hegelian philosophy with theology that characterized German “scientific” scholarship, Hodge preferred to ground his theology in exegesis and critical reflection on Scripture in the manner of his favorite German colleague, Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg.³⁹ Still, Hodge took developments in Germany very seriously and devoted a portion of the journal

34. *Ibid.*, 216.

35. *Ibid.*, 218.

36. *Ibid.*, 215.

37. *Ibid.*, 213–14.

38. There were two series of riots, the first taking place May 6–8 and the second from July 6–7. For a thorough account, see Karla Irwin et al., “Chaos in the Streets: The Philadelphia Riots of 1844,” Falvey Memorial Library, Villanova University, <http://exhibits.library.villanova.edu/chaos-in-the-streets-the-philadelphia-riots-of-1844>.

39. Hengstenberg, professor of Old Testament at Berlin and editor of the influential *Evangelische Kirchen-Zeitung*, was “orthodox and confessional.” Hodge studied under him in 1827 and translated many of his writings in the *Biblical Repository*. See Annette C. Aubert, *The German Roots of Nineteenth-Century American Theology* (New York: Oxford, 2013), 160–63. Schaff was also a personal friend of Hengstenberg; see Penzel, *Philip Schaff* xxix.

Biblical Repository and Princeton Review to the translation and discussion of German works.

In a generally positive review of *The Principle of Protestantism*, Hodge acknowledged that, despite having read the work twice, there was much in it he did not understand. He appreciated Schaff's discussion of the twin principles of justification and Scripture alone, but disagreed with Schaff concerning several matters involving "the nature of the church." This, Hodge acknowledged, "is one of the most difficult departments of theology."⁴⁰

Hodge insisted against Schaff that protest was at the heart of Protestantism. The movement was birthed in protest against a mediating church that dispensed salvation through the sacraments it administered rather than by the principle of "faith alone."⁴¹ While Hodge granted Schaff's point that Protestantism was connected to Roman Catholicism, he insisted that Schaff underestimated the threat of Catholicism to religion in America. Whereas Schaff considered Catholicism less dangerous than the rationalism of such thinkers as David Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach, Hodge retorted that "Romanism is immeasurably more dangerous than infidelity."⁴²

Hodge also thought Schaff overemphasized the threat of sectarianism. In Hodge's view, sects arose in protest over oppressive institutions, primarily corrupt churches that required "assent and consent." Therefore, the only legitimate response "when unscriptural terms of communion are enjoined" is separation. Since American denominations or sects, however, had emerged in different lands and situations, Hodge insisted that separation did not mean disunity. Acknowledging Schaff's unfamiliarity with America, Hodge explained that more "real unity, more real brotherhood" prevailed among the evangelical denominations of America than in the united churches of Europe.⁴³

Although the whole of *The Principle of Protestantism* is "about the church," Hodge lamented, "we have tried in vain to find out what the author means by the church."⁴⁴ Without mentioning the Westminster Confession of Faith explicitly, Hodge's assessment that "true unity" is spiritual and his suspicion of Schaff's emphasis on external union as a visible sign seem based in Westminster's description of the catholic or universal church, "which is invisible, [and] consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof."⁴⁵ According to Hodge, "Schaff constantly speaks as though he regarded . . . union secured and expressed by outward bonds, as far more essential to unity of the church than appears to

40. See Charles Hodge, "Schaff's Protestantism: A Review," *Biblical Repository and Princeton Review* 16 (1845): 626.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*, 631.

43. *Ibid.*, 632.

44. *Ibid.*, 626.

45. The Westminster Confession of Faith, "Of the Church," XXV.1

us consistent with its true nature.”⁴⁶ For Hodge, this true nature is a “spiritual unity” that is “independent of external ecclesiastical union.”⁴⁷ This difference between visible sign and invisible reality was a matter to which Hodge would return a few years later in his disagreement with Nevin over Christ’s mystical presence in the Eucharist.

A far less accommodating response to Schaff’s book originated with another Reformed luminary from Schaff’s own, newly adopted denomination. As president of the synod, Joseph Berg of Philadelphia had signed the document announcing Schaff’s election to the Mercersburg professoriate. Again in his capacity as president, Berg spoke at the synod’s opening assembly the week before Schaff’s address. In this address, he offered his own solution to the “church question” declaring that the German Reformed Church had directly inherited the undefiled doctrines of the original apostolic church through various Christian communities after the second century in the south of France and adjacent areas. These protesting churches were uncontaminated by Roman influence. Their witness culminated in the fourteenth-century Waldensian community, which Berg insisted was the true parent of the German Reformed Church.⁴⁸ Thus Berg declared against Anglo- and Roman Catholics that the German Reformed had a true apostolic succession through protesting and persecuted communities that owed nothing to the Roman Catholic Church—called by Berg the “church of the Anti-Christ.”⁴⁹ As Berg contended in a volume completed just a month after Schaff’s inaugural address, “If we admit that the church of Rome has ever been the church of Christ, you concede the whole ground.”⁵⁰

A starker contrast with Schaff’s notion of development and dependence upon the Roman Catholic Church is hardly imaginable. But Berg’s stance was not extraordinary during an era of anti-immigration agitation and sectarian rioting. Berg convened a committee in September 1845 to pursue charges of heresy against Schaff, suggesting that Schaff promoted papism. The examination itself was anticlimactic: the Berg faction was completely dismissed. *The Principle of Protestantism*, if fairly understood, was declared to “promote the true interests of religion.” Both Schaff and Nevin—who defended Schaff’s work tirelessly in articles in the denomination’s newspaper—were praised for their efforts to “build up and honor the welfare of the church.”⁵¹

While Hodge’s critique focused on Schaff’s esteem for visible union over the denominational system, and Berg’s on his appreciation of Roman Catholicism, a

46. Hodge, “Schaff’s Protestantism: A Review,” 631.

47. *Ibid.*, 632.

48. *Weekly Messenger* 9 (November 20, 1844): 1913, cited by Thompson and Bricker, in editors’ preface to Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 11.

49. Cited in Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 13.

50. Joseph Berg, *The Old Paths* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1845), viii.

51. “Acts and Proceedings of the Synod, York, Pennsylvania, 1845,” 80, cited in Shriver, “Heresy at Mercersburg,” 39.

third aptly illustrated the distance of Schaff from the heirs of the Puritans. New England-born and Andover-educated, George Cheever was the influential editor of the *New York Evangelist* and would soon pastor New York's Church of the Puritans. He dismissed Schaff's view of historical development saying that the church does not develop but revolves around its lodestar, the Bible, always at the same distance, just as the earth revolves around the sun.⁵² Less complex than Berg's theory of survival, Cheever's simple biblical focus and dismissal of theological development represented the distance between Schaff and the American Puritans he had come to redeem.

Church and religion as stream and flow

Schaff's understanding of Christianity as a dynamic process toward the kingdom of God, rather than a static orthodoxy or a subjective piety, resonates in several ways with recent theories of religion such as that advanced by Thomas Tweed. In contrast to theories that focus on beliefs, experiences, worldviews, or institutions, Tweed defines religions as "confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries."⁵³ At the heart of this definition is a concern for recognizing the role of movement in religious life. Thus, Tweed employs the aquatic imagery of "flow," similar to Schaff's "stream." While Tweed writes as a historian, ethnographer, and theorist of religion, and Schaff as a theologically concerned historian of Christianity, they both concur that metaphors of flow, in Tweed's words, avoid "essentializing religious traditions as static, isolated, and immutable substances."⁵⁴

In so doing they open the way for considering the interaction of religious streams. Tweed speaks of a religion as "a flowing together of currents."⁵⁵ In a similar way Schaff was at pains throughout his exposition of Protestantism's formal and material principles to show how these characteristics of the mainstream have been held and developed in the confessions of Lutherans as well as Reformed and even at times by the Catholic church as well. Many currents contribute to the mainstream.

Tweed also recommends the aquatic model for its ability to illuminate how religion relates to other elements of human life such as "economy, society, and politics."⁵⁶ Similarly, Schaff, in his desire that the church advance Christ as "all in all," was vitally concerned with these connections, particularly with the arts and the state. Schaff warmly recommend the arts to Puritan America, seeing, for

52. "Dr. Schaf's Work on Protestantism," *New York Evangelist* 16.36 (Sept. 4, 1845): 142. Schaff responds to Cheever in *What Is Church History?*, 86–87.

53. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 54.

54. *Ibid.*, 60.

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*

example, only praiseworthy endeavors in Anglo-Catholics' efforts to recover older forms of Christian art, architecture, and ritual. Church and state were intimately connected in the various European states in which Schaff had lived. He particularly valued the state's role in advancing church union, as in Prussia. At the same time he cherished the freedom of the church. The issues of religious freedom and the relation of the church to the government are ones he would reflect on throughout his career.⁵⁷

Tweed's conceptualization of religion is also useful in understanding Schaff's mission in these writings. He highlights the role of storytelling in religious people's efforts "to make homes and cross boundaries."⁵⁸ Schaff introduced *Principle of Protestantism* as a statement of "the ground on which I expect to stand in your midst."⁵⁹ In Tweed's terms, his narratives of church history are an effort at religious homemaking, an articulation of an evangelical catholic, Anglo-German identity. His inaugural address is a statement that makes sense of Schaff's reasons for leaving the intellectual capital of Europe for a small school in the land of promise and industry. His thought is also strongly eschatological, connecting the present moment and its crises to the ongoing process of crossing the boundary into the kingdom of God by transcending the divisions of nineteenth-century church and culture.

Schaff's fluid understanding of the church served him well as he came to make a home in America. The motto, adapted from Terence, "nothing Christian is alien from me," that he placed on his books and bequeathed to the American Society of Church History encapsulates his ecclesiology and career as a Christian ferryman. While Schaff became increasingly American, and in his terms "Anglo-Saxon"—in his work in support of Sabbath reform among other activities—and while he soon agreed with Hodge on the merits of the American denominational system, his fluid understanding of the church underscored all of his endeavors and was adopted by later American ecumenists. In its embrace of progress and change, his ecclesiology anticipated the theological modernism that undergirded much of mainline Protestantism in the twentieth-century. In its uncompromising commitment to Christian catholicity and the organic development of the church as the unified body of Christ, the means of the world's redemption, he also prepared the way for twentieth-century Protestant ecumenists, whose vision of a more united church leading to a "new Christendom"⁶⁰ was closely linked to Schaff's vision of the church as the means by which Christ would become "all in all." The extent to which this marriage of theological progressivism, churchliness, and ecumenism has continued to occupy an important but tenuous place in American religious culture

57. Graham, *Cosmos in the Chaos*, 123–50.

58. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 74.

59. Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 55.

60. Mark Thomas Edwards, *The Right of the Protestant Left: God's Totalitarianism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 93.

is reflected in the reception to Schaff's initial statement of *The Principle of Protestantism* and its resonance with contemporary conceptions of religion.

Author biographies

David R. Bains is professor of religion in the Howard College of Arts and Sciences at Samford University. He is co-editing the *The Church in History: Philip Schaff and the Church Question* with Theodore Louis Trost, vol. 3 of the Mercersburg Theological Study Series (Wipf and Stock). His publications include works on the history of mainline Protestantism, religious architecture, and worship.

Theodore Louis Trost is professor in the Department of Religious Studies and in the New College at the University of Alabama. He has written on a variety of topics from *Douglas Horton and the Ecumenical Impulse in American Religion* (2003) to "'Devil's on the Loose': Creedence Clearwater Revival and the Religious Imagination," in *Finding Fogerty: Interdisciplinary Readings of John Fogerty and Creedence Clearwater Revival* (2013).