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**The Dreams and Nightmares  
 of Christian Liberalism**

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A fashionable, forward-looking group of young friends in the big city are making names for themselves and carving out their generation’s place in an exciting new world. One of their circle, incongruously, is a clergyman. His friends like him, but are mystified why he should be interested in something so plainly out-of-date and reactionary as *religion*. They are a literary coterie, so he decides to write a short book explaining himself to them. He is clear where they stand. It is not simply that their lives have nothing in them ‘that would in the least way resemble religion’, and that ‘you have succeeded in making your earthly lives so rich and many-sided that you no longer need the eternal’. On the rare occasions when the subject of religion crosses their minds, they conclude that it is about ‘fear of an eternal being and reliance on another world’, beliefs which they find ridiculous. They conclude, therefore, that ‘religion everywhere can be nothing other than an empty and false delusion’.[[1]](#endnote-1)

This story could be set in our own time, which we think is so secular, but Friedrich Schleiermacher actually wrote this description of his worldly friends in Berlin in 1799. Already, at the end the eighteenth century, it was commonplace to dismiss Christianity as self-evidently false. These lectures are on the history of Protestantism, and today my starting-point is that, for at least half of its history, Protestantism has been struggling against atheism, secularism and religious indifference. This secularist challenge first emerged with the so-called ‘Enlightenment’, a restless mood of questioning which blended earnest philosophising with vicious satire, and which was marked by a moralistic rationalism. The Enlightenment liked Christianity’s ethical teachings, but disliked anything which it called ‘superstitious’. It is not simply that specific Christian beliefs suddenly looked implausible. Christianity’s roots in a particular historical moment, and claims for Jesus Christ’s eternal significance, began to feel crass. Surely a mature philosophy would be more generic and universal, and would focus on morality. Link that with the Enlightenment commitment to religious toleration, and pretty soon you think that the details of religious doctrine matter much less than your moral character. It did not help that, for plenty of Enlightenment critics, moral character was one thing the Christian churches sorely lacked. For the radicals of the age of the French Revolution, the church was a thoroughly malign force, set up, as the English revolutionary Tom Paine put it, ‘to terrify or enslave mankind and monopolize power and profit’, and to do so by peddling its Bible, ‘a collection of the most paltry and contemptible tales’.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Plenty of Christians, naturally, rejected all this as hateful blasphemy. But for some, almost all of them Protestants, blunt rejection seemed inadequate. These are the people we may call liberal Protestants, though as we shall see liberal theology does not always mean liberal politics. The liberals’ project was reconciliation: to find a route which accommodated both the best of Christianity and the best of the secularists’ critiques. Naturally, these liberals found themselves opposed by both sets of hardliners. The result was a series of three-way battles, and what I want to do today is to track some of those. Before I start, though, a warning. Most of us will instinctively identify with one of the three parties in this struggle: conservatives, liberals or secularists. Be careful. The struggles of our own times do not map neatly onto those of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. You may find yourself having some unexpected sympathies.

Two things fired Protestant liberalism. One was a genuine conviction that secularism had to be defeated, not only to save society from madness and the guillotine, but to keep the saving power of the Gospel alive in ordinary people’s lives. In 1892, in a book tellingly titled *The Evolution of Christianity*, the American theologian Lyman Abbott described himself as living in a time of religious ferment, in which Christianity could only be preserved ‘by expressing it in terms which are more intelligible and credible’ to modern ears.[[3]](#endnote-3) In good evolutionary terms, Christianity had to adapt or die. The old doctrinal certainties had become stumbling-blocks. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a liberal theologian as well as a poet, believed that reinterpreting contentious doctrines offered ‘the means of silencing, and the prospect of convincing, an alienated brother’[[4]](#endnote-4).If you want modern people to swallow the Gospel, you need to get rid of the things in it which might make them gag.

This conservative, pragmatic argument was true, but not the whole truth. Liberal theologians were trying to make Christianity credible not only for sceptics, but also for themselves. They too could no longer believe all the old doctrines. Liberal Protestants were, like all of us, men and women of their time. They shared their age’s squeamishness about miracles, and wanted a Christianity which did not depend on them. They shared their age’s belief in progress and improvement, and found that their consciences revolted at the doctrine of Hell. And they shared their age’s optimistic view of human nature, and wanted a Christianity which did not keep banging on about original sin.

All this meant that, to traditionalists, liberal Protestants looked like weak-kneed compromisers, swaying with the winds of fashion, whose only response to secularism was to retreat and concede. There is a lot of truth in that, but it is not the whole story. If liberal Protestantism had been no more than a series of grudging concessions, it would hardly have survived for more than two centuries. What marked out the thoughtful and creative liberals was that they did more than resile from old truths. They embraced new ones; or, as they put it, they used the sceptics’ insights to see the Protestant gospel in a more faithful light than ever before. Unwilling to tag along behind an intellectual agenda set by sceptical thinkers; they tried to outflank it or even to get ahead of it: to embrace a deeper radicalism that could still be authentically Christian. It is unquestionably a brave approach, though as we shall see, perhaps not always a wise one.

The pioneer was Friedrich Schleiermacher, back in 1790s Berlin. He had been trained in a kind of decaffeinated theological rationalism, in which the Bible was sieved to filter out anything miraculous or disconcerting, leaving a moral code of which Jesus was the great exemplar. Devotionally, this was pretty thin gruel, but it was backed by both churches and governments, which tend to like moralising religion. Schleiermacher’s 1799 book *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* was an attempt to go in a different direction. The book’s basic rhetorical manoeuvre is the disarming feint. He lays out his readers’ indifference to and contempt for religion, and then proceeds to agree with them. The idea that religion’s purpose is to inculcate morality is an insult to both religion and morality. As for the ‘cold argumentation’ and ‘calculating proofs’ of theological reasoning, they are no more than the ashes left when religion’s fire has died. Religion, he insists, is fundamentally not about how we act or how we think, but about how we feel: the ‘heavenly sparks that arise when a holy soul is stirred by the universe’. Philosophical speculation which is not grounded on this intuition is worse than futile. Such philosophers imagine that they are God, able to sit in detached judgement over creation. Instead, they are a part of creation, limited and contingent. Their religious intuitions are unique, just as no two people, looking at the night sky, would connect the same stars to form the same constellations. But it is only in feeling the power of those perceptions, and sharing them humbly with one another, that any true religion can be found. He does not call on his readers to accept specific doctrines, but rather to ‘become conscious of the call of your innermost nature ... and follow it’. He does not even urge the reader to believe, but rather to ‘see with his own eyes’.[[5]](#endnote-5)

A pretty peculiar defence of Christianity, you might think. Plenty of his contemporaries condemned it as pantheist mush which had conceded virtually everything to the sceptics. In fact, though, Schleiermacher argued that you could get to a more-or-less orthodox Christianity from this unpromising starting-point; and that if you did not, you ended up with a Christianity whose life was choked from it by dead theological formulae and what he called a ‘mania for system’. For him, true religion is a matter of the heart, of longing to be ‘grasped and filled’, of ‘feelings ... like a holy music’. He was not so much trying to argue a case as to awaken his readers’ own intuitions. If your soul does not long ‘to drink in the beauty of the world and be permeated in its spirit’, then, he says, you have no religion, and there is nothing more to be said. And he feared that this was true, above all, of most professed Christians: stone-hearted second-hand believers. Two decades before *Frankenstein* was written, Schleiermacher compared this kind of religion to trying to assemble and bring life to a corpse.[[6]](#endnote-6) His achievement, then, was to imagine a kind of Protestantism which embraced the latest philosophies but still had an encounter with God burning in its heart. This built a kind of Christianity which could be defended against nineteenth-century scepticism, and which was worth defending. In the process, however, he constructed a kind of Protestantism which was at least as open to distortion, abuse and caricature as the dead orthodoxies he deplored.

To begin with, the market for this kind of religion was distinctly niche – and, a theme which will recur, it was overwhelmingly intellectual and male. Most Protestants were not terribly troubled by the ominous rumbles of scepticism and secularism. During the nineteenth century, however, the changing weather began to be unmistakable. A persistent drip-drip of unsettling new ideas from all directions started to erode Protestantism’s certainties. In places it threatened to wash them away entirely. Many Protestants experienced this simply as a storm to be weathered as best they could. But some discovered that it had its own appeal, and tried to ride the wave.

The attack came from two principal directions: the two authorities which Christians had, since medieval times, described as the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature. An explosion of new scholarly interpretations of both authorities seemed, at times, to threaten the very possibility of Protestant Christianity’s survival.

The threat posed by the new Biblical scholarship was more immediately apparent. Protestantism had, since its inception in the sixteenth century, worked hard to close down what it saw as illegitimate ways of using the Bible. In place of the freewheeling appeals to allegory and symbolism which had been the norm during the Middle Ages, Protestants insisted on the literal sense of the text. The problem, however, is that large parts of the Bible consist of detailed historical narratives whose doctrinal or moral relevance to Christians is not obvious. If you are no longer allowed to read these passages allegorically, you begin instead to ask awkward questions such as, Are these historical accounts literally true? The chronology of the book of Genesis, for example, which if read literally, dates the creation to approximately four thousand years BC. Even in the sixteenth century it was becoming clear that the historical traditions of Egypt, China and other ancient civilisations went further back than that. Miracle-stories were a different kind of problem: here, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rationalists were struggling not against the text’s inconsistencies, but their own incredulity. Could you really believe, to take the totemic example, that a whale had swallowed the prophet Jonah, kept him alive in its belly for three days, and then spat him out unharmed on a beach?

Even to ask these questions was to enter a new world. The Bible was implicitly being treated as an ancient text which could be analysed like any other. When the English cleric Henry Hart Milman published a *History of the Jews* in 1829, it whipped up a storm of controversy, not because of any particularly startling attack on the Biblical record, but because he recast the Old Testament into the mode of secular history, treating the ancient Jews as a Near Eastern tribe rather than as God’s chosen people, assessing and critiquing the documentary evidence. He didn’t deny miracle-stories; he simply played down their importance in the narrative. He went on to become Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral, but other boundary-stretchers were not so lucky. In the German-speaking world, where Biblical scholarship was at its most advanced, sceptics’ careers were ruined. In 1839, when David Friedrich Strauss was appointed to a university post in Zurich despite his having published a notorious *Life of Jesus* which denied miracles of any kind, the population were so outraged that it triggered a popular revolution and the overthrow of the canton’s liberal government.

In the hands of controversialists like Strauss, the new Biblical scholarship could be a secularist weapon, attacking Judaism and Christianity wholesale. Before too long, you were more likely to make than to ruin your career that way. In 1901 the German Assyriologist Friedrich Delitzsch claimed that virtually the entire Old Testament was based on earlier Babylonian texts. By the time it became clear how gross an exaggeration his claims were, his fame was already established. It became easy for interested nonspecialists to conclude that modern scholarship had comprehensively debunked the Bible. By the early twentieth century, for example, the scientist Ernst Haeckel, whose works were bestsellers in both German and English, could claim offhand that the Gospels were forgeries dating from the fourth century, and not attracted ridicule for such an outlandish view.

Many Protestants’ response to all this, of course, was that of the Zurich peasantry: outrage and denial. The new Biblical scholarship only seeped slowly out of the academy, and since most Protestants’ everyday religion does not hang on the chronological age of the universe or the edibility of seaborne prophets, it was possible for many of them simply to ignore these problems. But as ever, there was a third way. Most Biblical scholars were themselves trying to understand the faith, not to destroy it. It became common to see the Biblical text as encrusted with accretions and errors which needed to be scraped away. Coleridge summarised the distinction. He could no longer believe that ‘whatever is contained in the Bible is religion, and was revealed by God’. But he could still claim that ‘the Bible contains the religion revealed by God’[[7]](#endnote-7). You could still believe that the Bible was *inspired* without having to believe it was *infallible*. And if you did that, you could give the dusty old thing a new lease of life. Rather than being what Schleiermacher had warned it might become, ‘merely a mausoleum of religion’, it contained the living Word of God. The American Presbyterian David Swing, who was charged with heresy by his church in 1874, urged his congregation:

Always distrust anyone who rigidly follows the letter of God’s word, for thus you will be plunged into a world of discord, and the Bible will lie at your feet a harp, broken, utterly without music for the sad or happy hours of life.

The Bible, so the argument ran, could be *either* a source of inspiration *or* a polemical weapon: it could not be both.[[8]](#endnote-8)

But this approach also had formidable problems. If the Bible ‘must be read in a human way’, then perhaps it had to be read ‘like any other book’. That was the claim made by a provocative set of liberal position-papers published in England in 1860 under the anodyne title *Essays and Reviews*. And if you read it like any other book, you must accept that anything – *anything* – in it might be untrue. Perhaps it was simply a fallible human record of one ancient people’s religious experiences, inspiring perhaps, but no more authoritative than Babylonian myths.

It was this fear of a slippery slope that mobilised eleven thousand English clerics to sign a declaration opposing *Essays and Reviews*. But once the first wave of fear had died down, a weird calm descended. Slowly, it became clear that a real Christian faith was actually possible in the wake of Biblical criticism. In Germany, the late nineteenth century was a time of renewed Protestant self-confidence, thanks to the newly-unified German Empire’s aggressive promotion of Protestantism as a marker of national identity. Britain, by contrast, dealt with the new scholarship by housetraining it. In the 1880s, a group of Biblical scholars in Cambridge used the new methods to reach some reassuringly conservative conclusions, and the problem faded from public view. Its chief legacy was a rash of literary ‘lives’ of Jesus, imaginative, often fictionalised attempts to recreate the Gospel narrative as a human story, but within an entirely orthodox frame. Astonishingly, over 5000 English lives of Jesus were written in the second half of the nineteenth century. For a moment, it looked as if liberal Protestantism had successfully ridden the wave.

Alongside the crisis of Scripture was a (not unconnected) crisis of Nature. The new picture of the universe which telescope astronomy was painting was a little unsettling, chiefly, again, because the traditional six-thousand year timescale of creation began to look inadequate. Some sceptics began to revive the ancient Platonic argument that the universe is without beginning or end, which was difficult to reconcile with any kind of Christian orthodoxy. The real trouble, however, was not overhead but underfoot. The spread of mining in the early industrial age made geology an urgently practical science. The geologists, however, also found that their discoveries did not fit the traditional Christian timescale. As the idea of a six-thousand-year-old earth became more and more impossible to sustain, there were those who began to feel that geology had disproved Christianity. Some were triumphant about that, some were distressed. ‘If only the Geologists would let me alone, I could do very well,’ wrote the artist and idealist John Ruskin in 1851: ‘but those dreadful hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses.’[[9]](#endnote-9) In extremis, this led some to the quixotic claim that God had created the earth in such a way that it looked old, like a forged painting, an argument which was immune to disproof but not to ridicule. The geologists themselves, however, tended to be more sanguine. Men like Charles Lyell, the age’s greatest geologist, argued that the traditional view of a young earth shaped by a series of violent catastrophes culminating in a worldwide Flood was vulgar, unworthy of the orderly and patient God in whom they believed. Their vision, of a world shaped by slow, ancient, continuous processes, was as much religious or even aesthetic as it was scientific. A perfect divine designer, they reasoned, would not wrench his creation around like a drunken rider. Charles Kingsley, the scientist and historian now mainly remembered, rather unfairly, for writing *The Water Babies*, found that reading the new geology made him ‘rise up awe-struck and cling to God’. For him, and this is the classic liberal manoeuvre, the new science did not merely underline old religious truths, it revealed new ones. He also called it ‘the devil’s spade, with which he loosens the roots of the trees prepared for burning’. That is, it unsettled the lazy and formal faith of nominal Christians. It required, not a leap of faith or an intellectual breakthrough, but a leap of the imagination. It meant seeing that the universe was dizzyingly vast and ancient, and finding in that, not an alienating, dreadful emptiness, but rather what Schleiermacher had called ‘an astonishing intuition of the infinite’.[[10]](#endnote-10)

It could be done, but it had its price. The rocks on which the old faith was being re-founded turned out to be harder to read than some of the blithely confident liberal rebuilders assumed. Because, of course, geology was only the warm-up act for the crisis which broke in 1859, with Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*.

The idea of evolution, that living forms could be transformed into other forms, was in itself old hat. Darwinism’s novelty was, first, that it provides a plausible account of how evolution happened, namely natural selection; and secondly, that it thrust itself onto the public imagination as few scientific ideas ever had before. It was an idea whose time had come. Darwin’s book became a bestseller, and many of his readers found his arguments intuitively true.

So once again, for Protestants, there were the same three alternatives. A few decided that evolution explained the origin of life, made a creator God redundant, and so abandoned their faith. The universe, claimed Darwin’s German advocate Karl Vogt, consists entirely of physical matter, which was never created but simply exists eternally: Vogt famously claimed that the brain excretes thought as the kidneys excrete urine.[[11]](#endnote-11) Naturally, orthodox believers pushed back, helping to seed the persistent myth of the great set-piece battle between Science and Religion. But it was very rare, in that generation at least, for Protestant anti-evolutionists to base their argument simply on the Bible. They disliked evolution not because it was difficult to reconcile with Scripture, but because they disliked the notion of directionless, endless fluidity, in which species shaded into one another, in which nothing had any unchangeable essence, in which evolution had no ultimate purpose and in which it’s proceeded by means of vast suffering and endless extinctions. None of this contradicted any core Christian doctrine or plain Biblical teaching, and indeed, some bluntly traditional Calvinists, who had always maintained that the world is utterly mired in corruption, readily embraced Darwinism as proving that they had been right all along. But it did not fit at all with most Victorian Christians’ optimism, or with their sense of hierarchy and order. Nor, frankly, did the claim that humans, including white humans, were descended from apes fit with their sense of their own dignity and importance.

These concerns helped to shape how liberal Protestants who accepted Darwinism went looking for the spiritual insights it had to offer. Like gradualist geology, Darwinism suggested a God who worked patiently within his universe, ever-present. One Oxford theologian called it ‘infinitely more Christian than the theory of special creation’.[[12]](#endnote-12) But the excitement came, not from the strict Darwinian doctrine of natural selection, but from the more seductive notion of evolution, which quickly became almost synonymous with *progress*. Perhaps, under God, evolutionary change was not directionless, but drove inexorably towards higher forms, from microbes to monkeys to men. Perhaps (the idea was this intoxicating) that principle of gradual, inexorable progress was everywhere? That, after all, would explain how nineteenth-century Europe had become the pinnacle of civilisation. It became common knowledge that Mr Darwin had proved that *progress* was a law of nature.

Darwin had of course done no such thing, and deeply disliked this sort of mysticism. It’s true begetter was Herbert Spencer, a political philosopher who had abandoned Christianity for a progressivist philosophy, and who replaced Darwin’s neutral term ‘natural selection’ with ‘the survival of the fittest’. Suddenly evolution was a moral imperative. Those who survived and prospered, by definition, deserved to do so. Wealth and power were signs of virtue. The poor and weak, of course, were unfit and thus doomed by the law of nature. Attempting to protect or even to educate them was not only unrealistic but, arguably, immoral. Best to let nature take its course, or indeed, to weed out the unfit and accelerate the in any case inexorable progress towards a better humanity.

Darwin himself was somewhat less racist than the average Victorian Englishman, but his successors had no such restraint. His German populariser Ernst Haeckel argued that European imperialism proved white racial superiority. Darwin’s cousin Francis Galton coined the term ‘eugenics’ for his scheme to give natural selection a helping hand. John Fiske, whom Darwin called his best American expositor, reckoned that what he called it ‘the English race’ would inevitably crowd out the indigenous populations of both North America and Africa. Fiske coined the famous term ‘manifest destiny’ to describe this, a phrase whose queasy elision of what *will* be with what *should* be sums up what we now find repellent about this whole pattern of thought.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Fiske also claimed that Darwinism proved the existence of God, since religion itself could not have evolved unless it were true.[[14]](#endnote-14) That argument looked shaky even then, but it demonstrates that evolution in general, and Spencer’s social Darwinism in particular, was compatible with liberal Protestantism. Darwinian natural selection, overlaid with Spencer’s triumphalist moralising, was now sanctified by the claim that an endless struggle for existence was God’s will, and that the victors were the blessed. Evolution, wrote the Scots Free Churchman Henry Drummond, ‘is Advolution; better, it is Revelation ... the progressive realisation of the Ideal, the Ascent of Love.’[[15]](#endnote-15) This not only made a spiritual virtue of the age’s most powerful secular idea. It also provided the perfect riposte to any conservative Christian naysayers: they were simply out of date. The liberals had out-evolved them.

It is easy for us, of course. We know where this triumphant progress led. In 1914, two of the world’s three great Protestant powers, Germany and Britain, went to war, to cheers from liberal Protestants in both countries. In 1917, the third, the USA, rode into the fray on a wave of liberal Protestant warmongering. Liberal Protestantism in all three countries survived the war, but it lost its innocence. The stories, or, rather, the three national stories, are not pretty.

German Protestantism, far more so than its British or American counterparts, was unified and dominated by the state. It was common for late nineteenth-century German pastors’ homes to feature paired portraits of Martin Luther and of Otto von Bismarck, Germany’s two liberators. The strongly nationalistic bent of the now-united Protestant church was of a piece with its political conservatism, which saw internationalism as a dangerously socialist notion. In particular, Germanness had come to be associated with certain specific Christian or quasi-Christian virtues: courage, honesty, honour, love of beauty, disdain for profit and material advantage. And, in keeping with the social-Darwinism with which Germany was particularly enchanted, Germany’s own dizzyingly fast rise to world power proved the superiority of those virtues.

Yet German Protestant self-confidence was an anxious, brittle thing. While Germany saw itself as a new power, German Protestantism felt itself to be in retreat in the country’s huge industrial cities almost lost to it, threatened by socialism and secularism as well as Catholicism. It seemed that Germany might win the new industrial age and lose its soul. So when war came in 1914, Protestant clerics hoped it would be a moment of national awakening. This was a war for honour, and an honourable war; as the preacher at a service for German parliamentarians on 4 August 1914 put it, it was a war of ‘German civilisation against barbarism’. He added that ‘German faith and piety are intimately bound up with German civilisation’ and that elision became common.[[16]](#endnote-16) Some began to talk of how Christianity needed to be Germanised.[[17]](#endnote-17)

This clerical excitement was based in part on a narrative of a just war, which saw Germany as the victim of a coordinated plot between the sub Christian Asiatic hordes of Russia, scheming Catholic and socialist France, and – the lowest blow of all – Britain, whose Protestantism was a hypocritical cloak for its imperialistic greed. How could Britain, which had conquered so many countries on the flimsiest of pretexts, possibly discover self-righteousness in claiming to defend poor innocent Belgium – especially when Germany had only sent its troops through Belgium in the direst need? So now Germany was surrounded and outnumbered. And yet it swiftly won battle victories in 1914. Natural selection was working: with God’s favour, Germany’s virtues were more than a match for any number of their craven enemies. Could a victory be won, asked one minister in 1916? If so, ‘there is only one power that can do it … Martin Luther, the man of the gospel, who found courage through the power of the gospel and the sword of the spirit to assault the whole world and its money politics.’[[18]](#endnote-18)

During August 1914 German congregations doubled in size in many places, especially the most secularised cities. This seems to have been about families saying farewell to soldiers, and then praying for them, but to excitable clerics in that febrile moment, it felt like a revival. Everyone was swept up. More than 10% of all Germany’s Protestant clergy volunteered for military chaplaincies. And notoriously, in October 1914, 93 leading German academics signed a Declaration to the Cultured World, supporting to a war to defend the land of Goethe, Beethoven and Kant against the barbaric hordes. Amongst them was the greatest liberal Protestant theologian of the day, Adolf Harnack.

As the war ground bloodily on, German Protestantism, having made its bed, resolutely lay in it. As shortages of war materiel became urgent, churches were stripped of copper, brass and nickel, including, by 1917, organ pipes and bells. Food shortages were biting, but as political discontent became plainer, the Protestant establishment redoubled its support for the regime, opposing talk of political reform, and taking a particularly hard line against any hint of peace initiatives. After all, in a holy war, the threat of defeat should only renew your courage. In the army, those volunteer chaplains came to be loathed. When military defeat and crushing sanctions led to a collapse of both army and regime in October and November 1918, the churches opposed change to the end. One of the first signs that military discipline was breaking down was the near-total withdrawal of soldiers from the now-hated religious duties. German Protestantism had paid a high price for its folly, although the people it had cheered to war had paid more.

German Protestantism cannot be blamed for the nationalistic fervour that swept the whole country, but it played its part. The war cruelly exposed a key weakness of Protestant liberalism: if the world decided to go mad, it could do nothing to keep you sane. Schleiermacher’s view that religion is a matter of feelings meant that an outpouring of nationalistic rage could be a religious experience. And liberal Protestantism’s flexibility made it easy to discard passé Christian principles such as loving one’s enemies. In 1906 the great liberal Albert Schweitzer had depicted Jesus as a fiery apocalyptic prophet, whose ethic of non-resistance and love for humanity applied only to his specific historical situation and was now out of date. Troeltsch, citing Schleiermacher as a precedent, spoke of ‘reshaping ... the Occidental-Christian religion into an idealism of freedom’ which would demand and justify victory at any cost. In the social-Darwinist world of German liberal Protestantism, victory, and victory by any means, was always and by definition justified. So if liberal Protestantism was not actually responsible for Germany’s destruction, it was not for want of trying.[[19]](#endnote-19)

British Protestantism was less explicitly politicised and far less permeated by liberalism than Germany’s. It was no less enthusiastic for war. Even the supposedly pacifist Quakers supplied more soldiers than they did conscientious objectors. The bitter irony of British Protestantism in the Great War is how a theological stance so unlike Germany’s produced such a similar result. British preachers, too, believed in 1914 that they stood at a hinge of history. ‘The world is passing out of one thing into another,’ declared the archbishop of Canterbury. ‘Much that we set high is being lowered; much that we placed low is being lifted up.’ You’ll notice the whiff of evangelistic opportunism there, although in fact, despite considerable effort, attempts to spark renewals of religion amongst British troops during the war bore little fruit.[[20]](#endnote-20) But the churches hoped for more than just immediate conversions. As in Germany, British Protestants hoped that a good dose of war might draw their secular, materialistic nation back to the true faith. ‘Perhaps,’ the hymnodist Percy Dearmer mused in 1915, ‘God has allowed us to pull down the temple of modern civilization over our heads in order that the survivors may be cured of the modern habit of regarding man as a calculating machine.’[[21]](#endnote-21)

The real enemy, of course, was German aggression, a phenomenon which British preachers blamed chiefly on liberal theology. Their diagnosis was that Germany had become intoxicated by social Darwinism, and in particular by the notion that neither law nor morality could apply to states, a doctrine that some British preachers called the Gospel of Force. German liberal Protestantism, they claimed, had degenerated into a kind of militarist neopaganism, in which nation and race were preferred above humanity and universal principles. It thus fell to Britain to bring this once-great nation back to its senses, which meant first bringing it to its knees. As the bishop of London put it:

We are on the side of Christianity against anti-Christ. We are on the side of the New Testament which respects the weak, and honours treaties, and dies for its friends, and looks upon war as a regrettable necessity, and we are against the spirit that war is a good thing in itself, that the weak must go to the wall, and that might is right.

The result, he added, was ‘a Holy War, and to fight in a Holy War is an honour’. It was, as one pamphlet put it, a war between the ‘mailed fist’ and the ‘nailed hand’, albeit one in which the nailed hand was firing a machine-gun.[[22]](#endnote-22)

The irony of German and British Protestant propaganda in the Great War is that both sides were uncomfortably accurate: both the German account of the British as self-righteous, money-grubbing imperialists who are sticklers for rules which somehow never apply to themselves, and the British account of a Germany which had abandoned the law of men and of nations, which took force to be self-justifying and which prized national and racial superiority over justice and mercy. Britain’s stance was more traditionally Christian, and more profoundly hypocritical. What gives the lie to both sets of justifications is the steady aversion of churchmen in both countries to talk of negotiated peace. Each side insisted that justice, which is to sat revenge, must be visited on the other. Liberal Protestantism was not as implicated in Britain’s warmaking as in Germany’s, but neither country’s war effort did much to support the liberal ideal of humanity’s inexorable moral and spiritual progress.

The heartland of that ideal was now the United States. By the early twentieth century, a self-styled ‘progressive’ Protestant theology had attained a remarkable dominance amongst American church leaders, many of whom preached what Charles W. Eliot, the president of Harvard, called ‘the Religion of the Future’. Christianity had once promised to redeem a few chosen souls from a lost world, the progressive preacher Lyman Abbott wrote, but the new ‘social gospel’ promised something greater: ‘the transformation of the world itself into a human Brotherhood … the great world-wide democratic movement’. This was once again an evolutionary ideal, in which the world was struggling towards a higher moral plane. A widely used seminary textbook published in 1898 dismissed traditional notions of Christ’s second coming. ‘If our Lord will but complete the spiritual coming that he has begun, there will be no need of a visible advent to make perfect his glory on the earth.’[[23]](#endnote-23) So these progressive Protestants set themselves to make the world a better place, campaigning against divorce, gambling, the exploitation of workers and, above all, alcohol. These struggles were regularly described as wars or crusades.

So when a real war thrust itself onto America’s attention in 1914, progressive Protestants were ready. America was neutral, but from the beginning leaned towards the Allies, progressive Protestants most of all. This war to end war, for democracy and against tyranny, fit their evolutionary principles perfectly. It was the next, perhaps the decisive stage in humanity’s moral ascent. The Allies’ moral case against Germany was unanswerable: German aggression needed not merely to be contained, but to be punished. When President Wilson made a (doomed) attempt to broker a negotiated peace in December 1916, sixty church leaders signed a statement condemning the effort. ‘There are,’ they warned, ‘conditions under which the mere stopping of warfare may bring a curse instead of a blessing. … Peace is the triumph of righteousness and not the mere sheathing of the sword.’[[24]](#endnote-24) It seemed to make sense that an organisation pressing for the war to be fought to the finish should call itself the Christ Peace Union.

Progressive Protestants did not actually drag the United States into the war – Germany’s use of unrestrained submarine warfare from February 1917 did that – but they certainly tried. On 1 April 1917 the ministers of New York’s Plymouth Church, the progressives’ most influential pulpit, wrote to Congress urging a declaration of war. It was America’s moral duty, as the nation which was the world’s last, best hope, to save the world from militarism. The dean of Yale Divinity School claimed, without irony, that America ‘is called of God to be … a Messianic nation’.[[25]](#endnote-25) Like German liberalism, in such a moment American progressivism was willing to part company with some conventional Christian ethics. It is unclear whether Newell Dwight Hillis, a minister at Plymouth Church, really did say that he would forgive the Germans ‘just as soon as they were all shot’, or claimed that ‘if we forgive Germany after the war, the moral universe will have gone wrong’. But he certainly called Germany ‘a mad dog let loose in the world’s schoolroom’, and reviled talk of a negotiated peace for putting ‘too much stress on human life. … What is human life? All the great things of the world have been done through martyrdom.’[[26]](#endnote-26)

During the Congressional debate on going to war, one congressman read aloud a letter from an anti-war constituent, dismayed by pulpit warmongering:

We heard a minister state with vehemence … that the great question today is ‘Christ or Prussianism’. His idea was that we should shoot Christianity into the Germans with machine guns and cannons. Just how much Christianity he could cram into a 10 or 12 inch cannon he did not say.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Soon the whole country would be swept up into such sentiments. The United States has now almost forgotten its brief participation in the Great War, but for a couple of years the nation was gripped with a militaristic nationalism to match anything in Europe. It is only fair to add that America’s conservative and fundamentalist Protestants, having mostly been opposed to American participation in the war before 1917, generally swung behind it with enthusiasm once it had started, seeing it, amongst other things, as a war against the corrupt theological liberalism and especially the evolutionary thinking which they diagnosed as the root of Germany’s evils.

Liberal Protestantism has never fully recovered from the Great War. In my final lecture of the year, in April, we will return to some of its adventures and misadventures in the twentieth century. Its dilemma remains as it ever was: how to discard those parts of traditional Christianity which are for one reason or another unacceptable or incredible, and yet to retain a defensible core. It is far more modern and more rational to treat the Bible as a collection of historic religious experiences rather than as a direct revelation from God, but if Christianity is to be simply a religion of intuition and of reason, what is to prevent a descent into madness? When Charles Eliot at Harvard proclaimed a progressive ‘Religion of the Future’, one reporter commented drily that it was not a religion anyone would die for. It was hardly a comfort to discover that plenty of people would at least kill for it.

More conservative Protestants reviled their liberal brethren for having abandoned the historic faith for a malleable mush of modernism. And it is true that liberal Protestantism is – and makes a point of being – exceptionally adaptable to the world around it. In practice, of course, conservative Protestantism is almost equally pliable. All Protestants adapt: liberals are more likely to admit the fact. The theologians on all sides all sent their young men to the same trenches.

I do not want to end on that note, however. It is too easy from our vantage point to condemn those early liberals for their reckless naivety and even their culpable blood-guilt. We should not be as quick to judgement as they were. They were enduring a formidable bombardment. Secularism in the early twentieth century was, in simply intellectual terms, stronger than it has ever been since. The best modern scholarship was telling Christians that the universe was eternal, with no beginning and no end; that a progressive life-force of some kind drove the world’s development; that the Bible was a collection of myths and forgeries with almost no roots in real history; and that humanity was evolving to ever greater wisdom and virtue, a process which made quaint notions like justice and mercy seem obsolete. We now know, or think we know, that none of those claims are true. Our forebears had to digest them as best they could.

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