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Shailer Mathews: A Modernist's Search for the Christian God

by

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Abstract

[The liberal theologian, historian, and sociologist Shailer Mathews (1863-1941), dean of the University of Chicago Divinity School from 1908 to 1933, played a leadership role in the Social Gospel movement as well as advocating modernist thought. No enemy of science, he saw religion and science, including evolutionary theory and the higher criticism, as integral to making the universe intelligible to humankind. Although he did not agree that evolution could be trusted to bring about a better world, he transformed the Divinity School's pedagogy into a pragmatic, action-oriented, empirical, and socio-historical bastion of inquiry to acquire the true meaning of the Christian faith. He aspired to the ideals of Christianity believing that they preserved the historical Christian identity.]

The theologian Shailer Mathews (1863–1941) spent his professional career demonstrating that religion had a legitimate place alongside the scientific method, evolutionary theory, and higher criticism. Like his contemporary, the theologian, teacher, and Baptist preacher Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918) who played a key role in the Social Gospel and single-tax movements, Mathews called on the churches to retain their leadership role provided they become more than social clubs for their members. To be precise, the church required a social gospel that could unite science and religion in a cooperative partnership that would regenerate humankind. For churches to survive as meaningful institutions in the modern world, they needed a useful purpose. No longer could the Kingdom of God remain otherworldly; instead, the churches should seek to realize their objectives *in* history with the uplifting of all members, not just a predestined few. The churches must reject the characterization as class-driven institutions and, in alliance with the scientific community, seek the betterment of all of humanity. In applying the tools of science, history, and sociology to Christianity, Mathews educated his listeners on the processes

of change by keeping discussion within the boundaries of rational discourse. With talents that included teaching, theology, history, and sociology, Mathews threw himself to these tasks with tireless zeal.¹

FINDING A CAREER

Shailer Mathews was born of middle-class parents, descendants of several generations of teachers and Baptist ministers whose lineage went back to the seventeenth-century settlers who founded the Yankee town of Falmouth, Maine, which became Portland in 1786. His formative years in a mid-Victorian Baptist household turned his thoughts and deeds to evangelicalism, revivalism, literalism, and the sternness of Calvinistic theology. Reared in the moralistic rigor of a New England household barely touched by the forces of immigration and industrialization, he learned to keep accounts for this father's business, and instinctively sided with employers in labor/capital disputes reported in the local papers.²

In 1880 Mathews entered Colby College where, among his many assignments, he read Lionel Beale's *Protoplasm*, Richard Whatley's *Principles of Rhetoric*, Thomas Huxley's *Physiology*, John Fiske's *Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy*, Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, and Herbert Spencer's *Social Statics*. Drawn to the theory of evolution, he had little doubt it would have far-reaching effects on every aspect of society, including religion. After graduating in 1884, he followed in the footsteps of his mother's ancestors by entering Newton Theological

¹ Edwin E. Aubrey, "Theology and the Social Process," in Miles H. Krumbine (ed.), *Essays in Honor of Dean Shailer Mathews* (NY: Macmillan, 1933), 17–52. See Shailer Mathews, *The Church and the Changing Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1907); Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907).

² Shailer Mathews, *New Faith for Old: An Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 7, 12–13.

Institution at Andover where he completed his studies without ordination, a decision that carried no special significance other than his feeling that the curriculum had given him little preparation for pastoral work.³

After completing his religious training, Mathews returned to his alma mater as an assistant professor of rhetoric and elocution, where he drew the attention of Colby's new president, Albion Small (1854–1926), one of the founding figures in American sociology. Like Mathews, Small had attended the Newton Theological Institution, followed by study abroad at the universities of Leipzig and Berlin where he became a disciple of Gustav von Schmoller and Adolf Wagner's historical school of economic thinking. Benefiting from their tutelage, Small learned to attribute change to evolving social constructs rather than to rigid natural laws descended from some unknown source.

Sensing Mathews' untapped talents, Small transferred him from the department of rhetoric to history and political economy. Once adjusted to his new environs, Mathews followed Small's advice by taking postgraduate work in Berlin with historians Hans Delbrück, Schetfer-Boichorst, and Ignaz Jastrow. Like others before and after, he returned home with a fresh appreciation for the importance of historical methodology and a professed objectivity toward his subject matter. Influenced as well by the writings of Congregational pastor Washington Gladden, Protestant pastor Josiah Strong, and economist Richard T. Ely regarding the "social bearing" of Christianity, Mathews began a lifelong examination of the teachings of Jesus and the canons constructed over the centuries to legitimize Christian beliefs. His first book, *Select Medieval Documents* (1892), was published when he was still teaching at Colby College.⁴

³ Mathews, *New Faith for Old*, 16–18, 24, 108.

⁴ Mathews, *New Faith for Old*, 41, 42, 48.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

When hired by oil magnate John D. Rockefeller to help plan the University of Chicago and then lead as its first president in 1891, William Rainey Harper had held several prior teaching positions: Classics at Masonic College in Tennessee and Denison University in Ohio; and New Testament history at Morgan Park Baptist Union Theological Seminary in Chicago where he organized the Institute of Hebrew in 1881, a correspondence school dedicated to teaching scholarly study of the Bible. Eight years later, in 1889, as a member of the Yale faculty, Harper created the American Institute of Sacred Literature which became an arm of the Chautauqua movement for the democratization of education, including religious studies. A learned Semiticist who believed that a great research university should include the scholarly study of religion, Harper enabled the transfer of the Morgan Park Seminary to the University of Chicago, renaming it the Divinity School, the first of the university's six professional schools (Business, Divinity, Law, Medicine, Public Policy, and Social Service Administration). Hoping to shape a more progressive understanding of scripture, Harper also moved the American Institute of Sacred Literature to Chicago. Along with the Institute, Harper created the Council of Seventy, a cadre of theological teachers dedicated to carrying the scholarly study of the Bible to popular audiences.⁵

In 1892, at Harper's invitation, Albion Small moved from the presidency of Colby to Chicago where he headed the nation's first department of sociology. In one of his first acts as chair, Small invited Mathews to join him. Simultaneous with this offer, Ernest Dewitt Burton (another former colleague at Colby) offered Mathews the position of associate professor of New Testament History and Interpretation in the Divinity School. Mathews accepted the latter offer

⁵ Mathews, *New Faith for Old*, 61.

and joined the University of Chicago in 1894 where he found himself well-suited for the evangelical role set out by Harper to democratize religious scholarship. In 1899 he was made associate dean, and in 1908, succeeded Eri Baker Hulbert to the deanship, a position he held until 1933. As dean, Mathews spent many of his summers commuting back and forth from Chautauqua, New York, where he participated in the Summer Institute.⁶

From the very start of his career at Chicago, Mathews put himself in front of students and faculty; before church groups and public audiences; and readers of his books and articles. In addition, as editor of *Christendom*, *World To-Day*, and *Woman's Citizen's Library*, he discovered a calling in public discourse on theological and biblical scholarship, communicating to ever widening audiences. In 1903 Mathews helped found the Religious Education Association, intended to apply Dewey's pedagogical philosophy to religious education. He also served as president of the Northern Baptist Convention in 1915–1916; as director of the religious activities for Chautauqua (1912); as president of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ (1912–1916); as president of the Chicago Council of City Missions (1908–1915), and as president of the Baptist Executive Council of Chicago (1910–1919).⁷

When Harper was compelled by illness in 1912 to step down from the editorship of *Biblical World* which he had founded, he appointed Mathews to the position. This was a time when the issue of biblical criticism had devolved into a series of pointed disagreements between liberals and conservatives. The center of interest, Mathews observed, passed from the Old Testament to the New, to the comparison and relation of religions, to religious education, and finally to the expression of religion in various social and ethical activities. Facilitated by the American Institute of Sacred Literature, Chautauqua's education program, and the Council of

⁶ Mathews, *New Faith for Old*, 50.

⁷ Mathews, *New Faith for Old*, 72-73 76.

Seventy, Mathews set out to expand the social teachings of Jesus beyond Christianity's millennial focus.⁸

THE DIVINITY SCHOOL

In many ways the University of Chicago came to reflect the youthfulness and rich diversity of the Midwest, and of Chicago in particular. There among the bold structures of Martin Roche, Louis Sullivan, Henry Hobson Richardson, and the Prairie School of architecture, a group of thinkers assembled around the pragmatic temperament of John Dewey who headed of the department of philosophy and later pedagogy and education. Augmented by the work of James Hayden Tufts, George Herbert Mead, and Albion Small, Dewey's functional pragmatism came of age and spread through the university where it became a tool in their collective endeavor of critical enquiry. As early converts to Dewey's functionalism, the Divinity School faculty directed their creative energies to the critical study of the Bible and inquiry into Christian thought in general. Compared to the metaphysical biases of New England theology, the school's pedagogy was best expressed in the terms pragmatic, action-oriented, empirical, socio-historical, and forward-moving. Contrary to what was expected to be taught in a Baptist university, Mathews and his colleagues focused on the application of sociology and historical analysis to the study of religion, including contemporary issues of faith. With a plethora of books and articles, many of which were published through the auspices of the American Institute of Sacred Literature, the Divinity School became a bastion of inquiry into the true meaning of the Christian faith.⁹

⁸ "A Change of Editorship," *The Biblical World*, 40 (1912), 362-65; Mathews, *New Faith for Old*, 75, 83.

⁹ Read Harvey Arnold, *Near the Edge of Battle: A Short History of the Divinity School and the 'Chicago School of Theology' 1866-1966* (Chicago: The Divinity School Association, 1966); George Burman Foster, *The Finality of the Christian Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906); Daniel Day Williams, "Experience and

The socio-historical methods used by Mathews and his colleagues represented a distinctly situational or environmental approach to the development and context of religious ideas, beliefs, and institutions. Every dogma had a social context that explained its existence. “Needs,” Mathews observed, “are always the mother of theology.”¹⁰ This included even the doctrine of the Trinity, whose origin was functional rather than metaphysical. Similarly, he found no connection between the doctrine of immanence and the Christ of the synoptic gospels, the former having been drawn out of environmentally conditioned circumstances extraneous to the original message. “What is regarded as the most ... genuinely metaphysical dogma of the Christian religion is thus in fact a development of a social practice given metaphysical standing by political as well as by church authority.”¹¹ As explained by theologian Bernard Meland, doctrines were simply “the formulations of a particular social mind in response to specifically felt tensions in belief which had been precipitated by Christians living in a new environment.”¹²

The Divinity School’s emphasis on functional methodology required understanding psychology and sociology, since the subject matter which it addressed was not one of ideas, but of people and the needs that dominated their lives. The school approached doctrine from the point of view of social evolution and its formulation within a society directed by the “dominant social mind.” The religious thinking surrounding the Old and New Testament had been the

Tradition in American Theology,” in James W. Smith and A. L. Jamieson (eds.), *Religion in American Life. Vol. I. The Shaping of American Religion* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 463; Bernard E. Meland, “The Chicago School of Theology,” in Lefferts A. Loetscher (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Theology at Chicago* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1955); Gerald B. Smith, *Current Christian Thinking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1928); Nancy Frankenberry, *Religion and Radical Empiricism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1987); Larry E. Axel, “Process and Religion: The History of a Tradition at Chicago,” *Process Studies*, 8 (1978), 231-39; Darnell Rucker, *The Chicago Pragmatists* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969); Leonard I. Sweet, “The University of Chicago Revisited: The Modernization of Theology, 1890-1940,” *Foundations*, 22 (1979), 324-51; and William Lindsey, “‘Somebody, Somehow, Somewhere, and Somewhen’: Shailer Mathews and the Socio-Historical Interpretation of Doctrine,” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, 20 (1999), 191-215.

¹⁰ Shailer Mathews, “Theology and the Social Mind,” *Biblical World*, 46 (1915), 245.

¹¹ Shailer Mathews, *Growth of Idea of God* (NY: Macmillan Co, 1931), 135.

¹² Bernard E. Meland, “Reflections on the Early Chicago School of Modernism,” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, 1 (1984), 10.

product of Semitic, Greco-Roman, imperialistic, feudal, nationalistic, and bourgeois societies—each representing a set of values intended to satisfy changing human needs. Each successive age had to adjust to its environment, thus challenging the immutability of its inherited beliefs. As each new doctrine or creed became a source of authoritative belief, it also became an enemy of progress. “The ideals of the past [became] the source of injustice for the present; the hopes of the past, the conventions of the present; the spiritual achievements of the past, the inhibitions of the present.”¹³ Christianity was a *historical movement* whose doctrines were just a passing phase formulated to provide protection and self-direction. This meant that Christianity could not be studied separately from its environment. “The only real history of doctrine is the history of the people who hold doctrines.”¹⁴ As the Presbyterian theologian Arthur Cushman McGiffert, president of Union Seminary explained, “each generation must discover for itself the new truths and the new principles by which it shall live.”¹⁵

Unlike the “confessional” or “dogmatic” periods of the past, Mathews claimed that Christianity required no new doctrinal views, only the application of the scientific method to future theology. A new spiritual movement had begun. Christianity was not passing away as John William Draper and Andrew Dickson White, influential proponents of the view that science and religion are in fundamental conflict, had predicted; rather, a new power which Mathews defined as untheological, practical, and scientific was now positioned to shape a new moral Christianity.¹⁶

¹³ Shailer Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1924), 2.

¹⁴ Mathews, “Theology and the Social Mind,” 202, 205.

¹⁵ Arthur C. McGiffert, “The Progress of Theological Thought During the Past Fifty Years,” *American Journal of Theology*, 20 (1916): 327–28.

¹⁶ Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, 13, 19.

SOCIAL GOSPEL

Along with Walter Rauschenbusch, the leading spokesperson for the social gospel, Mathews offered a markedly new perspective in the analysis of religious theology by building a case for scholarly objectivity and empirical investigation of church history. As participants in the social gospel movement, both Mathews and Rauschenbusch were hopeful believers in a kingdom of social and economic justice, political equality, and brotherly love. Valuing democratic institutions as important historical markers in humankind's progression, they downplayed the idea of a personal otherworldly afterlife for one that took place *in* history. While neither of their idealized theologies denied the Christian hope for some future afterlife, they felt it required a dimension of activity beyond the power of man to know.¹⁷ When asked about the afterlife, Mathews responded: "What worries me is not if I shall have immortality, but if I have it, what I'll do with it."¹⁸

In *The Social Teaching of Jesus* (1897), whose chapters appeared originally as a series of articles in the *American Journal of Sociology* (where Albion Small served as editor), Mathews set his sights on identifying the actual social philosophy and teachings of the historical Jesus as a reference point for humankind's understanding of the ideal society he called the Kingdom of God.¹⁹ His aim was to study the words of Jesus as well as the narrative of his life with the aid of

¹⁷ Mary Doak, "Hope, Eschatology, and Public Life: The Contributions of Rauschenbusch, Mathews, and Niebuhr to Reopening the American Imagination," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, 23 (2002): 108–28. See Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1914).

¹⁸ Quoted in https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/projects/centcat/fac/facch13_01.html (accessed December 17, 2016). Mathews identified a generation of religious leaders who he credited with arousing the conscience of Christians to economic injustice. These included Washington Gladden, Josiah Strong, Lyman Abbot, George D. Herron, David J. Hill, Leighton Williams, Richard T. Ely, William D. Hyde, Graham Taylor, Charles R. Henderson, Francis G. Peabody, and Walter Rauschenbusch. See Mathews, *New Faith for Old*, 119.

¹⁹ Read Shailer Mathews, *The Social Teaching of Jesus: An Essay in Christian Sociology* (New York: Macmillan, 1897).

modern critical methods, and then separate their social content from clarifications and additions made over the centuries by subsequent writers. Likening his socio-historical role to that of a physicist or biologist who studied empirical phenomena, Mathews insisted that historical investigation should be kept free of denominational interference and other judgmental values and prejudices. He urged this on the assumption that the investigator should not be bound by any particular theology. With chapters in *The Social Teaching of Jesus* addressing man, society, the state, wealth, social life, the forces of human progress, and the process of social regeneration, he explained that the real Jesus intended “an ideal social order in which the relation of men to God is that of sons, and to each other that of brothers.”²⁰ In this regard, he found Jesus’s silence on matters such as slavery, gambling, and prostitution as interesting as those topics on which he did remark. This caused Mathews to conclude that the attempts by successive generations of Christians to restate the teachings of Jesus were mostly exercises in wishful thinking.²¹

Mathews concluded from the historical evidence that Jesus had repudiated any materialistic conception of his kingdom. Under no circumstance did he accept the temptation to become a new Caesar. Nor did he use the Kingdom of God as a figure of speech. Instead, it represented a social order of divine brotherhood which embraced the entire earth and not just an isolated part. It was a universal brotherhood expressed as the goal of human evolution—a goal and a possibility within man’s capacities and powers.²²

Like Rauschenbusch and other social gospels, Mathews explored the possibility that Jesus was a socialist. “If wealth is not for purely individual enjoyment but is to be used for the good of society,” he opined, “it is not a long step to the belief that any form of private property is

²⁰ Quoted in John Snape, “A Minister’s Changing Ideals,” *Bulletin of the Crozer Theological Seminary* (1911–1912):107.

²¹ Mathews, *The Social Teaching of Jesus: An Essay in Christian Sociology*, 40.

²² Mathews, *The Social Teaching of Jesus: An Essay in Christian Sociology*, 77.

anti-fraternal and that society itself can best administer economic matters for the good of its members.” Tempted to combine Christianity and socialism, Mathews ultimately thought the better of it, concluding that Jesus was a “gentle idealist” rather than an advocate of socialism. Equality was attained not by equalizing wealth but by the common possession of love that sprang from a sense of brotherhood. Individuality came with inequalities. Differences in wealth, employment, and education were no hindrances to fraternity. Disregarding place, time, birth, and social station, “every man who comes thus into a conscious reinstatement in the love of God, becomes also a brother of all other men in the same relation.”²³

Mathews also denied that Jesus had ever been an anarchist, monarchist, or democrat. In fact, he supported no special form of government and made no effort to condemn the pursuit of wealth as evil. Wealth was good provided its pursuit did not weaken those impulses that went outward toward fellow man.²⁴ “Jesus was neither a sycophant nor a demagogue. He neither forbids trusts nor advises them; he is neither a champion nor an opponent of laissez faire; he neither forbids trade unions, strikes and lock-outs, nor advises them; he was neither socialist nor individualist. Jesus was a friend neither of the workingman nor the rich man as such.... He was the Son of Man, not the son of a class of men.”²⁵ Although there were many who called themselves Christian Socialists, Mathews was not convinced that the name stood for the true principles of Christianity. The message of the gospel was not economic but spiritual, seeking to transform human lives into the ideals of Jesus. This meant leaving the people free to choose whatever social theory was “best calculated to make its principles operative.”²⁶

²³ Mathews, *The Social Teaching of Jesus: An Essay in Christian Sociology*, 149, 151, 191, 193.

²⁴ Mathews, *The Social Teaching of Jesus: An Essay in Christian Sociology*, 130–31, 148.

²⁵ Mathews, *The Social Teaching of Jesus: An Essay in Christian Sociology*, 156–57.

²⁶ Shailer Mathews, *The Social Gospel* (Philadelphia: Griffith and Rowland Press, 1910), 122.

So if Jesus was not a socialist, what was he? In 1910, three years after Rauschenbusch's classic *Christianity and the Social Crisis* which placed him staunchly in the socialist camp, Mathews published *The Social Gospel*, with its message of salvation for those individuals and societies who accepted Jesus as their Lord. While the "saved individual" was the end of the Divine Will, there could be no regenerated life that was anti-social. The worth of everyone was determined by his or her social relations. "A man is not merely to be saved *out* from an evil society [but] saved *into* a good society—the kingdom of God." True, there were those who interpreted the Kingdom of God as a state of the soul, or something within, or as some ideal social order called 'heaven,' but Mathews visualized it as "the association of men who possess the spirit of Christ." The Kingdom of God was earthly and accomplished both individually and socially with the diffusion of Christian principles into politics, industry, and domestic life.²⁷

Mathews identified three basic principles of the social gospel: love, fraternity, and the belief that God was working in human affairs to bring about a better social order. The world was full of God's presence. "That is the source of the Christian's hope," he insisted. Man was not alone "working desperately [and] uncertain of ultimate success." On the contrary, he was working with God "and God must bring in his own kingdom." Thus, the task of the Christian was to let God work through him and he, in turn, would work with God in the creation of a better social order."²⁸ Thus, when Mathews spoke of saving society, he did not mean that society could rely on man alone to save it. God's help was necessary to carry Christian attitudes and convictions into the future.²⁹ This did not imply or require the Church and State to become united. "An ecclesiastic in control of the State would be as unendurable as a politician in control

²⁷ Mathews, *The Social Gospel*, 11, 15, 18, 21. Written in the form of short exercises, each chapter ended with a quiz as well as questions for further study.

²⁸ Mathews, *The Social Gospel*, 29.

²⁹ Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, 33.

of the Church.” Actually, the Church had worked with a variety of governments. That said, Mathews did not intend for politics and religion to be kept separate. If there was good legislation, there would be good people among the governed. There should be the “Christianization of legislation,” meaning the extension into politics of the three principles of the social gospel.³⁰

Mathews endorsed the ethical benefits of legislation addressing the employment of women and children, the regulation of sweat shops, the campaign against tuberculosis, the regulation of immigration, and protection from those who grew rich on other people’s miseries. These reforms aligned with the ideals Jesus taught. But remedial legislation should not be limited to the correction and punishment of vice alone, but incorporate Christian ideals into ordinary laws. Christians had the responsibility “to make politicians feel that they are constantly under observation; to agitate for laws that shall embody the spirit of Christianity; and to see that such agitation is not merely spasmodic but is maintained continuously until a Christian public opinion compels legislation that shall embody the principles of fraternity and real liberty.” This required moral instruction via the Young Men’s and the Young Women’s Christian Associations; Bible-study courses in the colleges; Sunday-school; and organizations such as the Christian Endeavor, Baptist Young People’s Union, and the Epworth League.³¹

Mathews’s tenure as dean extended over twenty-five years during which time he made an indelible imprint on the Divinity School, the university, and the Baptist Church, specifically, the

³⁰ Mathews, *The Social Gospel*, 59.

³¹ Mathews, *The Social Gospel*, 137, 140–44. Mathews attacked the strictly economic interpretation of history by emphasizing how much it had neglected the degree to which personality, great men, ideals, and social customs had affected human life. Moreover, the forces acting on humanity could only be judged over long periods of time. This included the presence of a spiritual factor in the world’s progress, the substitution of moral control for force, the growing importance of individual worth, and the increasing significance of rights and justice. Acknowledging that Protestants were acquiring a new consciousness and sense of social responsibility, he constantly referred to the group-life of the church. The social acts of the church more so than any of its offices, authorities, creeds, theologies, or rationalizations opened the way to experience God. See Shailer Mathews, *The Church and the Christian* (New York: Macmillan, 1938).

application of scientific principles to conservative Christian thought; on the place of religious studies in academe; and the social gospel. For decades, he encouraged the transition of theological education away from scholastic training, replacing it with scientific inquiry and evolutionary theory which did not deny the importance of God or the Bible but, instead, made religion “as intelligible as arithmetic.” Mathews used the term “theological reconstruction” to define his approach. As a social gospeler, his rhetoric of reconstruction was cautious and sober, reaffirming an evangelical process distinct from evolution. He was a social gospel reformer, neither strident nor radical, whose bourgeois upbringing confirmed his ties to the business community more so than the laboring classes.³²

Contrary to the opinions of his fundamentalist and neo-orthodox critics, Mathews was a social gospeler committed to the belief that history moved in a *telic* direction, a term introduced by the American botanist, paleontologist, and sociologist Lester Ward. It implied the planned, purposeful improvement of society achieved through the development and application of human intelligence. What Mathews learned from Ward was that the ideal human life consisted in transcending the limits of egoistic individuality and pursuing ends that included the whole of humanity.³³

MODERNISM

In describing the period from the 1870s into the early decades of the twentieth century, Vergilius Fern, editor of *Contemporary American Theology*, remarked that the terms modernist,

³² See https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/projects/centcat/fac/facch13_01.html (accessed December 17, 2016).

³³ Mathews, *The Social Teaching of Jesus: An Essay in Christian Sociology*, 1, 27; Lester Ward, *Psychic Factors of Civilization* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1892), 2.

evangelical, fundamentalist, liberal, radical, progressive, and conservative did little to define religious belief. Depending on the issue and the cultural, economic, or political intent, the terms were often used interchangeably or acquired substantively different meanings.³⁴

Standing aside from Protestant orthodoxy because of his desire to incorporate the scientific method into religion, Mathews came under attack from an array of critics who accused him of endangering scripture, the very bedrock of Christian faith. Mathews was decried as a modernist, an epithet that some considered more harsh than the term liberal, but he made no excuse for his conviction that the scientific method was a positive force for Christianity. Mathews distinguished between modernism and liberalism, believing the latter showed interest in the repudiation of church doctrine. By contrast, the modernist stood for “the evangelism of the scientific mind.”³⁵ As heir to both the Enlightenment and Darwin’s theory of evolution, modernist theology represented a change in thinking based on the assumption that there was a timeless identity beyond Christianity’s dogmas, creeds, and church authority—a reality that Mathews identified as the true essence of religion.³⁶

As a modernist, Mathews respected the Bible for its sanctity and teachings. At the same time, he defended the higher critics for their historical analysis of the Bible’s origin and content, because not all of it carried the same authority. There was no universally accepted Bible, only different versions approved at different times by different church authorities. Regardless of whether the words and certain parts of the Bible were literally true or only allegorical, they remained inspired (rather than inerrant) and thus were “a trustworthy record of [the] human experience of God.” For the modernist, the Bible sprang from religion, not religion from the

³⁴ Vergilius Fern, ed., *Contemporary American Theology: Theological Autobiographies* (2 vols.; New York: Round Table Press, 1932–1933), I, ix.

³⁵ Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, 35–36.

³⁶ Read Kenneth L. Smith, *Shailer Mathews: Theologian of Social Process* (PhD diss., Duke University, 1959).

Bible. It represented “a door through which one enters the earlier stages of the Christian religion.”³⁷

Just prior to the Scopes Trial of July 1925 when the Protestant churches were caught up in what was then called a fundamentalist/modernist conflict, Mathews wrote *The Faith of Modernism* (1924) in which he explained modernism not in terms of a theology so much as a *method* for discovering truth: “It is the use of the methods of modern science to find, state, and use the permanent and central values of inherited orthodoxy in meeting the needs of the modern world.”³⁸ Modernism implied the use of sociological/historical methods to discern the true fundamentals of the Christian faith apart from those old dogmas, creeds, and doctrines that were reflective of a specific time period. For Mathews, fundamentalism did not stand for the true fundamentals of faith, but simply the ratiocinations of a specific time—a definition which clashed dramatically with how William Jennings Bryan and his defenders defined fundamentalism.³⁹

The Faith of Modernism has often been mistakenly regarded as the official rationale of the modernist movement. A closer reading of the book suggests that Mathews’s modernism differed from others in that he addressed the subject using a very specific historical context. This difference applied as well to his two earlier works, *The Church and the Changing Order* (1907) and *The Gospel and the Modern Man* (1910). In this context, Mathews explained modernism using a term he called the *social-mind*, suggesting an interaction between theological constructs and the forces operating at any given moment within a culture. Each shaped the other. The social-mind represented “a more or less general community of conscious states, processes, ideas,

³⁷ Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, 23, 45, 48–49, 50. Shailer Mathews preferred to be identified as a modernist rather than as a liberal, while his colleague, Shirley Jackson Case, preferred to be known as a liberal.

³⁸ Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, 23.

³⁹ Sidney Mead, *The Lively Experiment* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 173.

interests and ambitions which ... repeats itself in the experience of individuals belonging to a group characterized by this community of consciousness.”⁴⁰

In his search for the social-mind, Mathews identified numerous patterns of thought which gave meaning to the way Christians organized their lives. As communities struggled with issues involving matters of sex, sacrifice, disobedience, punishment, property, war, etc., the doctrines formulated by Greek, Coptic, Nestorian, Armenian, Roman, and Protestant councils became the group-authority that imposed and enforced rules for behavior. “The decisions reached by the fathers of orthodoxy were usually nearer the truth than the views proposed by heretics, but their survival was due to vital social forces rather than academic discussion.” This explained the mass, baptismal regeneration, Mariology, papal infallibility, and veneration of the saints, none of which sprang from the Bible but from the needs of contemporary societies. The major doctrines of Christianity were “not so much thought out as lived out.” They were not made in the order of mathematics or science but out of the messiness of life. The societies that formulated these doctrines, insisted Mathews, were believers in Christ *before* they chose to codify their group attitudes.⁴¹

Neither Jesus nor the earliest Christians started with theology. “Whoever heard Jesus demand that in order to be saved men should believe that God was a substance existing in three hypostases or that he himself possessed one person, two wills, a human nature consubstantial with humanity and a divine nature consubstantial with the Father?” Mathews asked. Not until centuries later were Christians required to believe in such propositions.⁴² This was best explained by the “seed-husk” theory of Adolf Harnack who reasoned that Christianity “meant God as the

⁴⁰ Mathews, “Theology and the Social Mind,” 204.

⁴¹ Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, 59, 65, 66.

⁴² Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, 79, 83.

Father, the Judge and the Redeemer of men, revealed in and through Jesus Christ.” To win over the Greek and Roman empires, however, Christianity had to absorb the world of Hellenism. It had to borrow every relationship in its environment to serve its ends, including local cults and holy places, saints and intercessors, annual festivals, amulets, charms, relics, and bones of the saints.⁴³ As a syncretistic religion *par excellence*, Christianity adopted all that the age could proffer, including a powerful priesthood led by bishops who gloried in their succession and apostolic ordination. Working together with the sacraments which they alone claimed the power to dispense, they reigned as the force behind Christianity and its promise of eternal life.⁴⁴

Mathews defended modernism as the use of science (the inductive method) to identify the core values of orthodox belief.⁴⁵ Beneath Christian theology lay a bedrock of basal attitudes and convictions:

- “Man needs God’s help and salvation if he is to be free from sin and impersonal nature including death.
- God, maker of heaven and earth, is fatherly and forgiving; He shares in humanity’s sorrows and struggles, and because He loves men is engaged in saving them both individually and socially.
- Jesus Christ is the revelation in human experience of God effecting salvation. His life, death, resurrection and words offer the practicable way of fellowship with and consequent aid from God, as well as ideals for human conduct.
- Good will, though never fully realized, is of the nature of God, and is the law of progress, the foundation upon which human society can safely be built, the only moral motive which reproduces in human life the spirit of God and the example of Jesus.
- Individual human lives persist after death in conditions determined by the possession or the lack of love.

⁴³ Adolf Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2005), 238–39.

⁴⁴ Harnack, *Mission and Expansion of Christianity*, 238–39.

⁴⁵ Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, 22.

- The Bible is the record of God’s revelation, to be used in the development of the religious life.”⁴⁶

These affirmations were more than the acceptance of biblical records, ancient facts, or the successive doctrinal patterns of the Christian church. They were the sum and substance of a faith that moved mountains. When followed, no man could deliberately seek to injure his neighbor or distrust his God. They were moral motives and direction for social action.

Most liberal Christians today take for granted the socio-historical method for interpreting scripture, viewing religion and theology as having been molded out of experience. Mathews insisted, however, that regenerate society could only come from those individuals whose souls had been transformed through personal religious experience. In this sense, he added the element of ‘evangelical’ to his interpretation of the saving or redemptive power of Jesus. Without the social order grounded in the spiritually transformative power of grace, man remained powerless to create the just society. Thus, Mathews’s commitment to the Protestant community, the primary audience to whom he wrote and lectured.⁴⁷

In his book, *Shailer Mathews’ Lives of Jesus—The Search for a Theological Foundation for the Social Gospel* (1997), William D. Lindsey examined the way in which the fundamentalists and neo-orthodox thinkers interpreted the Chicago School of modernists. The party line from both groups of critics focused on the allegation that modernism had uncritically

⁴⁶ Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, 80–81.

⁴⁷ Shailer Mathews, “A Positive Method for an Evangelical Theology,” *The American Journal of Theology*, 13 (1909): 22; and Shailer Mathews, *The Gospel and the Modern Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1910), 64. Read also Jennifer G. Jesse, “Evangelical Liberalism and American Public Theology: Reflections on Shailer Mathews,” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 25 (2004): 22–49; Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900–1950* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003); Kenneth Cauthen, *The Impact of American Religious Liberalism* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1983); and Charles Harvey Arnold, “The Terminology of American Religious Liberalism, 1876–1939,” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 1 (1980): 45–59.

accepted the inevitability of progress, a disbelief in sin, a false understanding of human nature, and the transcendence of God. In other words, Mathews and the members of his Chicago School were “culture Protestants” who assumed that history moved inevitably in a progressive direction.⁴⁸ But Mathews dissented from such near-sighted optimism. Evolution did not necessarily equate to progress. “The dangers of progress are as real as the dangers of reaction,” he warned. “The new world is not yet a brotherhood.” He feared a future age of moral license and political anarchy. In the popular culture, evolution symbolized certain observed trends in the cosmos, including an expressed confidence that the current of “Christlikeness” was a condition toward which humanity was trending. Mathews found no such certainty. Nor did he believe that evolution could be trusted to bring about a better world. It could be devolution instead.⁴⁹ In a sense, humanity was not yet good enough to assume the legacy left by science and he wondered if Christianity could confront its future challenges with sufficient force to change course appropriately.⁵⁰

Kenneth Caughen, professor emeritus at Crozer Divinity School, has suggested that the core message of the Chicago modernists was seven-fold. *First*, that religion seeks to relate the individual and the group to the cosmos; *second*, Christianity is a social movement whose centerpiece is the way, the truth, and the life of Jesus; *third*, doctrines are relative to the socio-cultural setting and “function pragmatically to serve the spiritual needs of people;” *fourth*, the function of theology is to restate the centrality of Christian values within the socio-historical environment; *fifth*, the teachings of the Bible assist individuals in achieving the fullness of life; *sixth*, doctrines should not be taken as literally true; and *seventh*, modernism “is primarily a

⁴⁸ William D. Lindsey, *Shailer Mathews' Lives of Jesus—The Search for a Theological Foundation for the Social Gospel* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 218.

⁴⁹ Mathews, *Is God Emeritus?* 26.

⁵⁰ Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism*, 4, 9.

stance and a method rather than a body of doctrines.”⁵¹ Drawing from theistic naturalism, empiricism, and pragmatism, they examined Christianity based on the relativity of its values to the specific needs and assumptions of the age.

GOD EMERITUS

In one of his more controversial books, *Is God Emeritus?* (1940), Mathews explained how religion had done a disservice to both man and God. “The churches,” he wrote, “have been more focused on preparing men for a post-mortem world about which they know nothing, than for the organization of life in the social, economic, and political conditions which they judge outside the realm of religion.” The inefficiency of such a conception had turned into a modern tragedy. Worshiped by tens of millions, with hundreds of thousands of buildings dedicated to him, with millions of publications written about him, with commandments attributed to his sovereignty, and with pacifists and warmongers depending upon his sense of justice, God had become a symbol of wishful thinking. Indeed, Mathews considered the topic of God a rather seedy business, a form of self-help or personal adjustment of man to his immediate political, economic, and environmental needs. Insisting that God was more than the patterns of thought drawn from social behavior, he found himself arguing for a God who was not interpretative but ontological. Reflecting what the neo-orthodox writers Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr preached, God was other than what man had made him over the centuries.⁵²

⁵¹ Kenneth Cauthen, “A Call for a New Modernism,” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, 13 (1992), 21-22.

⁵² Mathews, *Is God Emeritus?* v.

Mathews concluded that the God of his childhood had retired from active participation in the world's events. He had no further duties to perform, having returned "into the Heaven of poetry and primitivity." In moments of stress and danger, people still appealed to this inscrutable providence hoping he might rectify injustice. But this was the same God who ordered soldiers into crusades; caused people to accept pestilence as punishment for their sins; and rewarded them for their deaths in battle. This anthropomorphic entity to which humanity was organically united in a help-gaining relationship, ruled a rebellious world, saving only those whom he selected.⁵³ With pacifists praying for peace and others praying for vengeance or victory, Christian orthodoxy seemed incapable of explaining God's indifference to human suffering. If God is omnipotent, then why did he let evil persist, or had he simply withdrawn from the current fictions of who he was and what he represented? There was a degree of vulgarity in the alluring formulations of God across time and cultures, some made into revelations that were accepted as final, and others into mythology and poetry to formulate the noblest of thoughts. This was the God who Mathews judged to be emeritus.⁵⁴

The historical God may have ended but the idealization of humanity remained. In one important way, Mathews interpreted its impact as the beginning of the end of the society he had been born into and the common understanding of how social structures—whether secular or religious—developed. In his conception of social process, evolutionary thought affected both structures with equal force. Mathews insisted on a "subliminal Christianity" which existed outside the formulas and authority of the church. It was not so much a denial of the former Christianity but rather a set of values which stood behind the many doctrinal patterns that had arisen across human culture. They included:

⁵³ Mathews, *Is God Emeritus?* 7, 23, 33–35, 85–86.

⁵⁴ Mathews, *Is God Emeritus?* 2.

- The word *God* in Christianity is a term that is used to describe those forces which play a role in the evolution of humanity or what Mathews calls “the personality-producing activities of the cosmos.”
- What Christianity calls the God of law is really a “God of love” who represents the very heart of Jesus’ teachings which the social structures in different periods had complicated with “misdirected zeal” to mean other things.
- Personal values dignify man more than any other.
- To the extent that love is the true expression of the cosmic process, it furnishes the motive for human progress.
- Although Christian religion uses anthropomorphic analogies like father and son as a means of adjusting to the “personality-producing activities of the universe,” the actual truth is independent of such analogies.
- Pictures of Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory are representations of mankind’s endeavor to explain that death is not an end but only a step in the evolution of the cosmos. Beyond such hopeful analogies, mankind must be content with agnosticism.⁵⁵

In response to this view, Mathews’s critics accused him of moving from God as an objective reality to one of subjectivity.⁵⁶ Others viewed his theological methods as an “impoverished conceptual theism”— a God of spirit and not the personal God of Christian belief. When asked if God was a person, he replied: “Conceptually, he is a person; metaphysically we must be agnostic on this.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Mathews, *Is God Emeritus?* 87–90.

⁵⁶ Kenneth Cauthen, *The Impact of American Religious Liberalism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 155, 157–59.

⁵⁷ Quoted in https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/projects/centcat/fac/facch13_01.html (accessed 12/17/2016). According to Jerome A. Stone, Mathews was a religious naturalist who conceived of God as a creative process within the universe. His religion derived from common sense and process-oriented beliefs grounded in the scientific method. He wanted religion anchored in an evidence generated socio-historical reality in order to distinguish truth from time-based dogmas and creeds. See Jerome A. Stone, “Is God Emeritus? The Idea of God Among Religious Naturalists,” *Journal of Liberal Religion* 5 (2005): 62.

Mathews admitted that his dressed-down version of Christian religion might not be appealing to everyone, but he noted that increasing numbers of Christians were finding historical anthropomorphisms and practices lacking in appeal. If Christianity was to have any part in man's spiritual development, it must become "something more than a projection of group practices and beliefs." To turn to a sovereign God when humanity is weak will always be a source of comfort for those who are defeated. But it may also be an excuse for refusal to act in ways which involve sacrifice.⁵⁸

Standing forth above it all was the spirit and example of Jesus's love for all to see. It was that love which was the most expressive way to build human relations. And in that respect, God was not *emeritus* but a practical adjustment to the cosmic activities which Jesus expressed. The ethical teachings of Jesus were significant irrespective of the different historical and anthropomorphic interpretations of God and his kingdom.

To feel and aspire to the ideals of Christianity entailed more than sentimentality or wishful beliefs. Like William James in his *Will to Believe*, if God proved useful in adjusting to the personality-producing activities of the universe, so be it. Clearly, Mathews was expressing a theme not much different from William James. To the extent that the idea of God rationalized lives and to the extent that the idea made better persons, it represented a belief system that 'worked' and therefore efficient in aiding man's adjustment to reality. It was a conception born of personal experience by which man adjusted to the cosmos.

Mathews lived through enormous changes in the world, best symbolized by the transformation that took place between his birth during the Civil War when the world was lit by candles and kerosene lamps, and his death during the Second World War with the world powered

⁵⁸ Mathews, *Is God Emeritus?* 90–91.

by electricity, gas turbines, and the beginnings of atomic energy. The very fabric of the civilized world had changed. The same could be said for changes in the role of the church where new and old fault lines challenged its claim to authority. As a lecturer, organizer, author, editor, and dean, Mathews became an indefatigable missionary in the broadest sense of the word, laying out a socio-historical case for church unity, internationalism, brotherhood, and a social gospel.

The reconstruction of Protestant theology developed by Mathews and his Chicago colleagues presented a radical departure from prevailing beliefs. Modernism's break from the literalism and narrowness of conventional orthodoxy created a perception of two colliding worldviews in which neither side was willing to negotiate, much less accept, a middle ground. Modernism was a forbidding revelation to those fundamentalists who had only known of the supernatural Christ through dogmas and creeds.

Mathews's influence on both historical and theological thinking demonstrated the importance of inductive reasoning on the institutional and intellectual aspects of American religious thought. His healthy iconoclasm marked him as someone who followed closely the contours of historical inquiry and evolutionary process before showing his Christian credentials. But questions remained. To what extent did Mathews's modernism preserve the generic historical Christian identity, or had it lost its credibility? Aside from the movement known as neo-orthodoxy, was the post-Darwinian optimism associated with liberal theology a trend toward or away from the spiritual ideal and moral example of the generic Jesus? How consistent are the elements of depravity, salvation by grace, and the transcendent God with the immanent God and the confidence placed in science and human progress? Clearly, there remains sufficient food for thought to keep this conversation going long into the future.

SELECT WRITINGS OF SHAILER MATHEWS

Historical

- *Select Medieval Documents*, 1892, 1900
- *The French Revolution*, 1900
- *New Testament Times in Palestine*, 1899
- *The Spiritual Interpretation of History*, 1916
- *The Validity of American Ideals*, 1922
- *The Making of Tomorrow*, 1913
- *The Messianic Hope in the New Testament*, 1905

Social Aspects of Christianity

- *The Social Teachings of Jesus*, 1897
- *Jesus on Social Institutions*, 1928
- *The Social Gospel*, 1909
- *Scientific Management in Churches*, 1911
- *The Individual and the Social Gospel*, 1914
- *The Church and the Changing Order*, 1907
- *Christianity and Social Process*, 1934
- *Creative Christianity*, 1935
- *Patriotism and Religion*, 1918

Religious Belief

- *The Growth of the Idea of God*, 1931
- *The Atonement of the Social Process*, 1930
- *Immortality and the Cosmic Process*, 1933
- *The Gospel of the Modern Man*, 1910
- *The Faith of Modernism*, 1914
- *Contributions of Science to Religion* (with thirteen scientists), 1924
- *The Church and the Christian*, 1938
- *A Dictionary of Religion and Ethics* (with G.B. Smith), 1923
- *A Constructive Life of Christ* (with E. D. Burton), 1900
- *The Student's Gospels* (with E. J. Goodspeed), 1927
- *New Faith for Old: An Autobiography*, 1936
- *Is God Emeritus?* 1940