

9. *From New Theology to New Thought*

Metaphysical Christians look to the Greek concept of Mind, Idea, and Expression as their primary meta-narrative. However, another equally important strain of western thinking flows into metaphysical Christianity, initially called the New Theology but which we today refer to as liberal theology.

The New Theology came to be a theological response to three developments that overwhelmed the traditional theology of mainstream Christianity: Isaac Newton's new understandings of the laws of physics in the 17th century that challenged our understanding of the heavens; the geological discoveries of the 18th century that challenged our understanding of the earth; and the biological discoveries of the 19th century that challenged our understanding of humanity and life.

These challenges led to what Sydney Ahlstrom refers to as "The Golden Age of Liberal Theology."⁷⁹ Liberal Theology embraced what these new understandings had to say and recognized them as simply new revelations of Truth. Theological explanations of how the cosmos worked, how the earth was created, and how human beings came to be were replaced by scientific and historical explanations. Modernity began four hundred years earlier and came into fruition in the second half of

the 19th century. Truth was no longer revealed by God and interpreted by theological authorities. Truth now rested in scientific discovery and the controlled experiment.

Religious authority shifted to more liberal theologians inside the church, such as Henry Ward Beecher, and to the Unitarians who split from Congregationalists over Calvinist beliefs. It also went to those outside the church, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Robert Ingersoll, who had left the church altogether. We know that Emerson greatly influenced Charles Fillmore. In the following insight, we will hear what he had to say about Henry Ward Beecher and Robert Ingersoll.

Liberal theology found its natural home in two places — in the theological seminaries, most notably the prestigious Congregational seminary at Harvard (which had become Unitarian), and in independently published books and magazines, such as Lyman Abbott's *The Outlook* and, as I will argue Charles Fillmore's *Unity* publications.

Eight ideas in The Supernatural that you won't find in mainstream Christianity.

Here is an example of Liberal theology that should resonate with metaphysical Christians, written by Lyman Abbott, a Congregational minister, and advocate of the New Theology. The lecture was given in 1898, and it lists eight ideas from the New Theology. These ideas align very well with New Thought. My piece makes the case that these ideas influenced our founders.

⁷⁹ Ahlstrom, Sydney. *A Religious History of the American People*, Yale University Press, 1972. pp. 763-84.

Lyman Abbott came to my attention when I observed Emilie Cady quoting him in *Lessons in Truth*, saying, “We talk to God; that is prayer. God talks to us; that is inspiration.”⁸⁰ He also came to my attention when I learned that he was a protégé of Henry Ward Beecher, who influenced the theistic ideas of Charles Fillmore.⁸¹

Here are the eight ideas from Abbott’s lecture, with my interpretations:

1. *God is not apart from nature and life, but in nature and life.* Metaphysically understood, nature and life are not created but expressed by God through divine ideas. This punctures the duality of heaven and earth, the supernatural from the natural. There is one presence.

2. *Creation is continuous.* As Eric Butterworth says, the Eternal is forever begetting the only begotten, and our only obligation is to allow God to be God in us.

3. *All events are providential.* Many people do not know that providential means the protective care of God or nature as a spiritual power. Abbott declares that God’s providence is in all things, all events, all people. There is one power.

4. *Revelation is progressive.* God reveals divine nature to humanity as humanity can accept it. In earlier times, this was through revelation, in modern times through discovery, and in more recent times through our ability to understand in compassionate ways. But in all times, revelation comes as consciousness is raised.

⁸⁰ *Liberty or Bondage, Which?* <https://www.truthunity.net/books/emilie-cady-lessons-in-truth-study-edition-12-paragraph-30>

⁸¹ More about that is in Insight 10, Benevolent and Engaged or Distant and Benign?

5. *Forgiveness is through the law, not in violation of it.* Forgiveness does not erase the penalty of sin (shame) nor the effect of sin (disease). Instead, it releases the desire to hold onto sinful conditions, thereby removing the cause of shame and disease. Forgiveness is obtained through a transformation of human desire, not by confession.

6. *Sacrifice is the divine method of life-giving.* Sacrifice, for Abbott, is continuing to love regardless of the state of that which is loved. Sacrifice does not give life by vicarious suffering but rather by the transformation of the subject of our love.

7. *Incarnation is not consummated until God dwells in all humanity.* Christian metaphysicians adjust this statement to Incarnation is not completed until God lives in the consciousness of all humanity. We might apply this statement to the Creation as well as the Incarnation: God dwells in all humanity because we are made in the image of God, but it is through the incarnation in consciousness that we are made in the nature of God.⁸²

8. *Jesus Christ is seen to be the firstborn of many brethren.* Abbott reminds us that there may be differing degrees of divinity, but only one kind. The kind of divinity that dwelt in Jesus also resides in us. Our task is to raise it up.

The origin of these ideas is unclear. It may be that the New Theology of Liberalism adopted them from New Thought, or it may be that New Thought adopted them from the New Theology. What is certain is that these ideas remain vitally relevant today. So they establish a

⁸² This notion of the deification of human beings is taken up in Insight 12, *Join Me in Becoming God*.

direct connection between New Thought and the New Theology.

I bring this up to emphasize that metaphysical Christianity may have much to offer those in mainline Christianity who are struggling with declining membership. These ideas can help us understand not only evolution but also many forms of change we are confronted with today — changes in climate, world order, race relations, sex relations, and changes in our understanding of gender. As I said in the Preface, we in metaphysical Christianity extend a hand of fellowship to you, not to convert, but rather to collaborate in the ministry inaugurated by Jesus Christ.

Evangelical Liberals and modern Liberals.

New Thought, Unity, and its theology of metaphysics are not generally associated with what we today call liberal theology. There are undoubtedly significant differences. But Sydney Ahlstrom's chapter concludes by noting that there were also substantial differences within liberal theology itself. Ahlstrom writes,

Regarding revelation, thinkers parted ways over interrelated questions about the authority of Scriptures, the Church, and formal creeds. The question of Christ's nature and mission related to all of these concerns. Here as in the controversy over religion, two distinct tendencies emerged. The "Evangelical Liberals" were those determined to maintain the historical continuity of the Christian doctrinal and ecclesiastical tradition except insofar as current circumstances required

adjustment or change. Biblical study remained central, "Back to Christ" became a familiar slogan [and] the term "Progressive Orthodoxy ... very accurately expresses the purposes of the Evangelical Liberals."

... [on the other hand] "Modern Liberalism" may be used to designate a much smaller group of more radical theologians, men who took scientific method, scholarly discipline, empirical fact, and the prevailing forms of contemporary philosophy as their point of departure. From this perspective they approached religion as a human phenomenon ... Emerson could be regarded as a prototype ... William James [is a] more famous example.

What we know today as New Thought and metaphysical Christianity aligns very well with this description of Modern Liberalism. But we also see Evangelical Liberalism in Charles Fillmore's quixotic insistence upon the "Jesus Christ standard" and the importance he placed on metaphysical Bible interpretation. We also see it in Charles' acknowledgment of the influence of Henry Ward Beecher, an Evangelical Liberal.

Further, consider how "science" has been used in New Thought and Unity. Is it not fair to say that science has been our "point of departure"? Did Unity not start out declaring itself *Christian Science*? Further, does this not mean that our "point of departure" is for our religious *authority*, not necessarily our religious *practice*? Remember, *there are no authorities in metaphysical religion except our experience*. That is why we ground our beliefs in Greek metaphysics and the foundations of scientific thinking.

How metaphysical Christianity contributes to the historic Christian faith.

Ahlstrom concludes his chapter by discussing the significance of liberalism. He writes,

The single most vital fact therefore, is that the liberals led the Protestant churches into the world of modern science, scholarship, philosophy, and global knowledge. They domesticated modern religious ideas. They forced a confrontation between traditional orthodoxies and the new grounds for religious skepticism exposed during the nineteenth century, and thus carried forward what the Enlightenment had begun. As a result, they precipitated the most fundamental controversy to wrack the churches since the age of the Reformation. (p. 783)

I find two exciting things coming out of what Ahlstrom is saying. First, there is nothing non-Christian about having science as a starting point for religious authority. Any Catholic or Evangelical theologian who tries to place Unity's teachings outside the historic Christian faith should also challenge many mainstream Christian denominations, particularly Congregationalists and Episcopalians. Those who impune Unity as a sect or cult are disingenuous. They ought to pick on a denomination their own size.

Second, suppose it may be said that the New Theology attached the churches to modern science. In that case, it may also be noted that metaphysical Christianity has secured the churches to *the foundations of science* — Greek metaphysics. Again, we begin our spiritual claims

by asking, “do you believe in geometry, in medicine, in ethics?”

Are you an ethical, experiential, or philosophical, metaphysical Christian?

Before I move on, I want to highlight another observation Ahlstrom has made about the New Theology. He writes that there were fundamental disagreements among liberal theologians on two significant issues: the nature of religion and the nature of revelation.

First, there were moralists who, quoting Walter Rauschenbusch, insisted on “the fundamental truth that religion and ethics are inseparable, and that ethical conduct is the supreme and sufficient religious act.” We see these moralists today in those who advocate for “spiritual social action.” Ahlstrom goes on to say that others placed ethics within the “context of a more comprehensive effort to deal with the general phenomenon of religion.” We see these types in those who, like Charles Fillmore, believe that human progress and justice will come only when we have a transformation of the individual.

But Ahlstrom goes on to say that there are two types of those who stress individual transformation. One group was those.

“who stood in the tradition of Schleiermacher and William James (not to mention the Puritans and John Wesley), who put great value upon ‘being religious’ and

upon analyzing religious feeling. For them the religious consciousness and Christian *experience* were central, and in philosophy they often tended to intuitionism, subjectivism, and *mysticism*” ... [A second group] “was less interested in experience (though they might treasure it deeply and build upon it) than in *metaphysics* and the *philosophy* of religion” (My emphasis).

I don't believe we could find a better illustration that distinguishes the mystical and metaphysical perspective we see today in metaphysical Christianity. That is to say; it just might be that we in Unity today could place ourselves in one of three general categories of metaphysical Christian, which Ahlstrom calls the “ethical, experiential, and philosophical.”

Where are we today?

This book opens by asking *What are we?* It concludes by asking *Who are we?* It might be appropriate to ask at this point, *Where are we?* As I said in the Introduction, we must place New Thought in its proper context as a 19th and 20th-century expression of metaphysical Christianity, an authentic and distinct expression of historic Christianity that predates both catholicism and evangelicalism.

We must remember that the shift from the Galilean ministry to the start of the Roman Christian era was about 250 years. The same can be said of the shift to the dark ages, the shift through the dark ages, the middle ages, the flowering of Roman Catholicism, the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, and, most

recently, the discoveries of the astronomers, geologists, and biologists. Two hundred fifty years is a thumb estimate of how long it takes to see the shift to a new era in religious thinking.

If so, we may be halfway through a 250-year cycle to seeing the fruition of the movement begun in the 1890s by Emma Curtis Hopkins and her students. *Maybe*.

A shift into an era of metaphysical Christianity will need to be spiritually meaningful and strategically focused. What I mean by spiritually meaningful is embracing the mystical experience discussed in the next section, *Humankind's Relationship with God*. What I mean by strategically focused is garnering enough commitment to be disruptive, which is discussed in the subsequent section, *Ministry as Administrative Consciousness and Skills*.

My mission in TruthUnity is to see metaphysical Christianity grow in the human marketplace of ideas. I have always looked at the long game, and I still do.