

**The Oxford Movement's Influence upon German American Protestantism:
Newman and Nevin**

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The Mercersburg Movement came into existence nearly a decade after the birth of the Oxford Movement (1835). It began in 1844, when a Swiss-born, German-educated theologian by the name of Philip Schaff (1819-93) accepted a teaching position at the struggling Mercersburg Seminary in Pennsylvania at the suggestion of his mentor at the University of Berlin, Augustus Neander (1789-1850). After taking the post, Schaff teamed up with an American theologian on the Mercersburg faculty by the name of John Williamson Nevin (1803-86). Before Schaff's arrival, Nevin had already been laying the groundwork for this high-church movement. After hearing Nevin preach a sermon entitled "Catholic Unity," Schaff knew he shared a kindred spirit in Nevin: "I feared I might not find sympathy in him for my views of the church; but I discover that he occupies me in my position. He is filled with ideas of German theology."¹

It was specifically the German theological notion of organic development shared by Schaff and Nevin which proved to be the key element differentiating the mission of the Mercersburg Movement from that of the Oxford Movement, "Oxford and Mercersburg were concurrent [high-church] movements on different sides of the Atlantic with similar, though hardly identical agendas."² Schaff and Nevin voiced their appreciation, "of the deep intelligent conviction at work in the Oxford Movement."³ Yet, it was the

¹ David S. Schaff, *The Life of Philip Schaff: In Part Autobiographical* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897), 103.

² Richard E. Wentz, *John Williamson Nevin: American Theologian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 90. In essence, both movements sought to formulate a response to the religious subjectivism that plagued their contexts in different ways. The manifestation of "religious subjectivism" in the Oxford context was more political in nature. The Tractarians sought to assert the objective uniqueness of the Church of England amongst an emerging secularism which was allowing Roman Catholics to assume government positions. The Anglicans sought to do this via a principle of continuity with early Christianity. On the other hand, the Mercersburg school was responding to religious problems in America: sectarianism (which was fueled by revivalism) and rationalism (which was fueled by the Enlightenment). Both sectarianism and rationalism, according to Schaff, elevated the prerogative of the individual at the expense of the historical prerogatives of the church.

³ John Williamson Nevin, *My Own Life: The Early Years (1870)*, Papers of the Eastern Chapter, Historical Society of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, no. 1 (Lancaster, PA.: Historical Society of the Reformed Church, 1964), 149. Nevin describes his early thoughts regarding the Oxford Movement prior to his "five years of dizziness" thus: "And yet my first glimpse, perhaps, of what the church spirit really means, came to me unexpectedly from looking into a volume of the Oxford Tracts; which a friend had bought, found to be dry and tiresome reading, and then passed as a psychological curiosity into my hands. I was not converted in any sense to the views of the book. But I saw (what I had not believed before) that there was deep intelligent conviction at work in

Tractarians' lack of a doctrine of organic development which kept the Mercersburg theologians (especially Schaff) at a distance: "So far we go with young Oxford hand in hand, at the hazard even of being called reformed Catholic, or catholic Protestant. So soon however as it comes to the choice of the means, by which the object in view is to be reached, we are constrained to part with it, as unsound and unsafe."⁴

The "means" specifically employed by the Tractarians which Schaff believed to be "unsound and unsafe" consisted of their over-reliance upon the doctrine of Apostolic Succession. He cautioned that this argument for authority was, in essence, borrowed capital from Rome: "As the Puseyites, in this question of government and order, which they invest with undue religious importance both doctrinal and practical, stand upon essentially Roman Catholic ground... The points in which they still declare their system to be different from popery, are comparatively subordinate and unimportant."⁵ Because the Oxford Movement's argument for authority basically mirrored that of Rome, Schaff would prophetically suggest in *The Principle of Protestantism* that the movement had all the ingredients to backfire: the means employed to establish authority, when taken to its ultimate conclusion could dangerously lead its followers to the very thing the movement sought to defend itself against: Roman Catholicism.⁶ While some scholars have suggested that the argument for Apostolic Succession was a "Trojan Horse" put forth by crypto-Catholics within the Tractarian camp⁷, Schaff believed that it was actually the sincere Puseyites who had inadvertently created it to the peril of their own movement!

For most 19th century Protestant Americans, the Oxford Movement in England was either uncritically dismissed as just another form of despised Catholicism or was looked upon as a theological curiosity which seemed to have no relevance here in America. The purpose of this paper is to suggest the contrary. I argue that the difficult "Church question" posed by the Oxford Movement would come to especially torment the latter Mercersburg gentleman, John Williamson Nevin, who himself experienced a Newman-like "five years of

the Oxford movement; that the men concerned in it were neither fools, nor visionaries, nor hypocrites; and there flashed upon me, at the same time, some sense of profoundly earnest religious problem, which they were wrestling with, and in their way endeavoring to solve" (149). Schaff voiced his appreciation for the work of the Oxford Movement (which he labeled as Puseyism) in his *Principle of Protestantism*: "I look upon Puseyism as an entirely legitimate and necessary reaction against rationalistic and sectarian pseudo-protestantism, as well as the religious subjectivism of the so called Low Church Party; with which the significance of the Church has been forgotten, or at least practically undervalued, in favor of personal individual piety, the sacraments in favor of faith, sanctification in favor of justification, and tradition in its right sense in favor of the holy scriptures." (q.v., Philip Schaff, *The Principle of Protestantism*, trans. John W. Nevin [Chambersburg, PA: "Publication Office" of the German Reformed Church, 1845], 122-23).

⁴ Philip Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 124.

⁵ *Ibid.*, *Principle of Protestantism*, 126-27.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 127-28. I say "prophetically" because Schaff wrote *Principle of Protestantism* five years before the massive defection of Oxford Movement converts to Rome that occurred due to the infamous Gorham trial of 1850.

⁷ Emma Mason, "Tractarian Poetry: Introduction," *Victorian Poetry* 44 (Spring 2006): 4.

dizziness,” in which he struggled over whether to convert to Rome. Fittingly, it was Nevin’s exposure to the arguments put forth by John Henry Newman in *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* that would serve as a major catalyst behind Nevin’s theological crisis. Although Newman had converted to Rome by the time he wrote this essay in 1845, his theory of development possessed a modified Tractarianism that would come to mesmerize Nevin. It was in Nevin’s theological crisis where Schaff found the opportunity to fruitfully engage Newman’s notion of doctrinal development in an extended fashion. It is in his response to Nevin’s usage of Newman that we find a working comparison between the varying theories of doctrinal development of both Schaff and Newman.

The Dynamism of Schaff’s Theory of Organic Development

Before exploring Schaff’s response to Newman’s theory of doctrinal development either directly or indirectly, a brief description of organic development as understood by Schaff is in order. For Schaff, organic development was actually the careful balancing of two seemingly disparate notions: (1) organic union with the past and (2) dialectical advancement towards the future. One had to embrace these two poles in tension to properly belong to the Mercersburg School of historical development.⁸

This paradox was modeled for Schaff primarily by the Apostolic Typology of Church History laid down by Freidrich Schelling in his lectures delivered at the University of Berlin between 1841 and 1845 entitled “The Philosophy of Mythology and Revelation.” Schelling labeled the component of organic union with the past as the Catholic or Petrine principle. This was the tendency within Christianity to abide by established law or tradition otherwise known as the *Objective*. Schelling labeled the component of dialectical advancement towards the future as the Protestant or Pauline principle. This was an opposite tendency within Christianity to seek out freedom and liberty otherwise known as the *Subjective*. Schelling viewed the situation of the Apostles as an instructive foreshadowing of how these two countervailing tendencies present in his day should move forward: Peter, the antitype to Roman Catholicism, and Paul, the antitype to Protestantism, co-existed together in a dialectical relationship which lead to the synthesis of the ideal church of the future (i.e., evangelical Catholicism) typified by John, the Apostle of Love.⁹

Schaff would point out that to overemphasize one of the poles at the expense of the other inevitably led to abuses which he called Romanism (i.e., the improper use of the Catholic Principle) and pseudo-Protestantism (i.e., the improper use of the Protestant Principle).¹⁰ Schaff described the Oxford Movement as an exercise in Romanism due to its obsession with “mechanical

⁸ Payne, “The Church Question,” 171-72.

⁹ David W. Lotz, “Philip Schaff and the Idea of Church History,” in *The Legacy of Philip Schaff*, ed. Henry W. Bowden (Carbondale, IL.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 16-17.

¹⁰ Philip Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 122-23.

succession” and its narrow focus upon the Church Fathers which purposely ignored subsequent developments in doctrine (e.g., Reformation), thus rendering the “Church as a system handed down under a given and complete form, that must remain perpetually the same.”¹¹ In Schaff’s estimation, the Oxford Movement indeed possessed a notion of organic union with the past, albeit a limited timeframe within church history, but was deficient of dialectical advancement towards the future. He wrote, “Puseyism looks backward; we look forward. It tends towards Rome.... We move toward Jerusalem, the new, the heavenly, the eternal.”¹²

Maintaining the equilibrium between these two disparate tendencies was challenging, even for the Mercersburgers. In David Schaff’s biography of his father, he recalled an incident that occurred on the Mercersburg campus which served as a humorous, yet stark reminder of how difficult it was to preserve the balance of organic development:

Some colored men...working on the seminary grounds, overheard the discussions of the students about historical development, one of the crucial questions in the new movement. Greatly perplexed, they had recourse to Brooks, as to what “this here devilment [sic] theory meant which them thar [sic] students war [sic] talking about so much on the hill.” Brooks was a leader among the colored population of the village and also a constant champion of Professors Nevin and Schaff. “Devilment,” said he, “devilment! I guess they’ve been in enough devilment already. If them students don’t look out, the old devil will get hold of some of them, sure.”¹³

Although a funny anecdote, the event was somewhat of an omen. Nevin, Schaff’s partner at Mercersburg, eventually succumbed to the “devilment” by his not being able to properly balance the organic development equation. Although possessing a notion of dialectical advancement towards the future, Nevin became too infatuated with organic union with the past – a bias that would inevitably lead to his theological crisis. Schaff later admitted to Nevin’s biographer, Theodore Appel, that Nevin shared the tendencies of the Tractarians because he “looked backward and became Romanizing.”¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid., *Principle of Protestantism*, 124. George Richards provides a good explanation for why Schaff pejoratively called an overdependence upon Apostolic Succession, *Mechanical Succession*: “[Mercersburg] differed from the Anglican and Roman churches in emphasizing the Church as an organism of which Christ is the head and heart, instead of an institution mediating externally and mechanically between God in heaven and men on earth. In their theological thinking they were guided by analogies from the organic and the ethical order, not from the mechanical and forensic.” (q.v., George Warren Richards, “The Mercersburg Theology – Its Purpose and Principles,” *Church History* 20 [Sept. 1951]: 48).

¹² Philip Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 165.

¹³ David Schaff, *Life of Philip Schaff*, 127.

¹⁴ Letter of Philip Schaff to “Dear Friend” (probably Theodore Appel), 13 February 1889, Philip Schaff Papers, Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society, Philip Schaff

Although Schaff would play a large role in conducting Nevin out of his “five years of dizziness” and back into the Mercersburg fold, he sought to avoid being too closely associated with Nevin later in his life. Writing to Appel, Schaff expressly requested that Nevin’s biographer not identify him with Nevin’s position, because “I was never Romanizing and tried to check that tendency [in Nevin] without producing a split.”¹⁵ The leaven of the Oxford Movement had spread beyond Europe and affected the American Protestant scene.

**Encounters with Victims of The “Trojan Horse”
From Afar: Schaff’s Six Weeks in England during the Summer of 1844**

In 1841, John Henry Newman published the controversial *Tract 90*, in which he identified the ecclesial identity of the Anglican church as more Roman Catholic than Protestant. He was excoriated for making this assertion and the *Tracts for the Times* was soon shut down. Newman was so shaken by the feedback he received for *Tract 90* that he retired to his country parish of Littlemore and began to contemplate his future in the Anglican Church.¹⁶

Philip Schaff must have heard about this controversy while he was studying and teaching at the University of Berlin between 1840 and 1842.¹⁷ In 1843, he was persuaded by both Nevin and Neander to come teach at Mercersburg Seminary. But, before going, Schaff decided to spend six weeks in England to track down the main thinkers of this high-church movement whose *Tracts for the Times* had shaken the world.¹⁸ In *The Principle of Protestantism*, Schaff reflected a year later on how significant it was for him to meet with the leaders of the Oxford movement during this six-week visit in April and May of 1844.¹⁹

Already thus it appears clothed with a world-historical importance. I have myself hardly ever before had such an impression of the objective power of the “idea,” as during the

Library, Lancaster Theological Seminary. Lancaster, PA., quoted in Stephen Ray Graham, *Cosmos in the Chaos: Philip Schaff's Interpretation of Nineteenth-Century American Religion* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 65.

¹⁵ Letter of Philip Schaff to “Dear Dr. Apple [sic],” 18 June 1889, Philip Schaff papers, ERHS, quoted in Graham, *Cosmos in the Chaos*, 65.

¹⁶ Ben O’Connor, *Oxford Movement Proper* (Theo 693 Class Paper, Saint Louis University, 2007), 16.

¹⁷ Graham, *Cosmos in the Chaos*, 56, “Schaff’s willingness to risk censure in order to find out more about the fear and despised Tractarians is his insatiable curiosity and desire to learn firsthand about every religious movement. At a time when few German thinkers deemed events and movements in the church outside their homeland worth their attention, Schaff was amazingly perceptive alert to anything, anywhere that might be influential to the church” (56).

¹⁸ Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 77.

¹⁹ George H. Shriver, *Philip Schaff: Christian Scholar and Ecumenical Prophet: Centennial Biography for the American Society of Church History* (Macon, GA.: Mercer, 1987), xi. Shriver’s timeline of the life of Schaff was quite helpful in determining the months Schaff was in England during the year of 1844.

course of my late travel, through Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, England, and North America; encountering as I did everywhere, in the persons of distinguished ministers and laymen, if not precisely Puseyism itself, at least aspirations and endeavors of a more or less kindred spirit.²⁰

Although Schaff recognized Pusey as the ring-leader of the Oxford Movement, he first sought out John Henry Newman when he arrived in England. The controversy that swirled around *Tract 90* just three years prior still piqued the interest of the young Schaff and he desired to hear directly from Newman all the particulars that led to his premature retirement. Unfortunately for the inquisitive Schaff, he encountered a pensive Newman who was not willing to freely converse. The awkward meeting left an indelible impression on Schaff for the rest of his life; he recalled his uncomfortable encounter with Newman at his farewell address to the Eastern Synod of the Reformed Church on October 24, 1892: “[Newman] was remarkably reserved when I saw him, for half an hour, at Littlemore, as if he was seriously contemplating that decisive step which marks an epoch in modern church history.”²¹ A year after Schaff’s short visit at Littlemore, Newman converted to Rome.²²

It is unclear whether Schaff’s visit left much of an impression upon Newman. He made no mention of the encounter in his writings.²³ It is possible that Newman never took Schaff seriously, due to his background as a German historical theologian. Schaff would protest two years later that Newman was both uncritical and unfair in his sweeping rejection of German historical theology: “Even Newman shows a wretched want of acquaintance with the better productions of modern German historical inquiry, when he allows himself as he does to involve the whole in a summary charge of unbelief.”²⁴ There were at least three schools of German historical thought, which Newman lumped into one category.²⁵

²⁰ Philip Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 122.

²¹ Philip Schaff, “Introduction: Retrospect and Farewell,” in *Philip Schaff: Historian of the Universal Church*, ed. by Klaus Penzel (Macon, GA.: Mercer University Press, 1991), 4.

²² David Schaff, *Life of Philip Schaff*, 87.

²³ John Henry Newman, *Letters and Diaries*, ed. Birmingham Oratory, Vol. 10 (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1961).

²⁴ Philip Schaff, *What is Church History? A Vindication of the Idea of Historical Development* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott and Co., 1846), 6.

²⁵ Shriver, *Schaff: Christian Scholar and Ecumenical Prophet*, 3: “These three [views] were (1) New Lutheranism, which was interested in taking the church back to the confessions and orthodoxy of the sixteenth century and seventeenth centuries, (2) rationalism, or radicalism, which was challenging supernaturalism and applying critical methods to the beginnings of Christianity; and between these two – (3) the school of conciliation and mediation, with its evangelical, romantic, edifying approach to theology and history” (3).

After his appointment with Newman, Schaff decided to seek out Edward Pusey at Oxford.²⁶ This interaction proved to be worthwhile, as Schaff gained a willing, if grumpy, audience. Schaff found Pusey to be an ascetic scholar with a rigid personality. He found Pusey's devotion to a "static unhistorical orthodoxy, compiled out of selected fathers and councils" to be equally rigid.²⁷ Yet it was in their dialogue that humorless Pusey provided Schaff with an outline of the three interrelated principles of the Oxford Movement: (1) Apostolic Succession, (2) a narrow devotion to the Church Fathers, and (3) contempt for the Reformation.

Pusey was aware of Schaff's eventual destination in America and complained to Schaff how disconcerted he had become by the sect divisions there. His complaint quickly turned into an opportunity to convince Schaff that the imposition of Apostolic Succession was the only cure. Schaff recalled how Pusey longed for a situation where "the bishops of the Anglican Church and the Roman Catholic Church alone had the ground."²⁸

Schaff challenged Pusey regarding the foundational merits of Apostolic Succession. Schaff asked how a distinction between presbyter and bishop could be made when Scripture did not appear to do the same. Pusey accused Schaff of attempting to employ a faulty etymological argument. Schaff then moved the discussion to the Apostolic Fathers by asking about Clement of Rome, who in his *Epistle to the Corinthians* he appeared to be one of several presbyters (i.e., members of a college) who led the Church of Rome. Pusey countered that this leadership arrangement in Rome was most likely a provisional one: the bishop could have died and the seat still been vacant at the time Clement wrote *Epistle to the Corinthians* or the church could simply have belonged to another diocese.²⁹

Pusey then used the second tenet of the Oxford Movement to trump Schaff's challenges regarding the foundational merits of Apostolic Succession. Feeling he was not able to convince Schaff with the answers provided, Pusey fell back upon the overall testimony of the Church Fathers as his authority: "Where a thing cannot be proved from Scriptures, then the testimony of the church is final for me. We may rest with confidence upon its teaching during the

²⁶ Although Pusey is not considered to be a victim of the "Trojan Horse" phenomenon per se, his conversation with Schaff is highlighted because it provides the general contours of the Oxford Movement. Schaff would come to Oxford again eight years later (1853) to find a Pusey who "does not seem to be shaken in his ecclesiastical position by the defection of Newman" (q.v., David Schaff, *Life of Philip Schaff*, 175). It is common knowledge that Pusey was eventually exposed to German ideas, which may have served as a safeguard in keeping him from getting snagged in the "Trojan Horse." After Schaff's visit with Pusey in 1853, Pusey conveyed to Schaff a softer Tractarianism which seems to entertain a reluctant inclusiveness towards the Reformation: "I do believe that the Lutheran and other Dissenting bodies are under great loss. I do think that by virtue of their baptism pious individuals who are in ignorance, belong to the soul though not to the body of the church" (175).

²⁷ Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 79.

²⁸ David Schaff, *Life of Philip Schaff*, 88.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, *Life of Philip Schaff*, 88-89.

first six centuries.”³⁰ Although the origin of Apostolic Succession may have been a questionable issue, Pusey asserted that the testimony of the Church Fathers had cleanly settled the issue by the sixth century. This response was troubling for Schaff as he was not comfortable with the testimony of the Church Fathers being placed on par with the authority of Christ and the Apostles.

Pusey’s perceivably narrow appeal to the first six centuries of the church would lead Schaff to ask him about the significance of the Reformation. Schaff argued that because the Catholic Church was unwilling to relent from the Romanizing abuses which the Reformers had exposed, they had no other choice but to ordain themselves. Pusey answered back, “Why could not the Reformers have applied to England for ordination?” When Schaff tried to convince Pusey that Luther was simply trying to recover lost Augustinian thought, Pusey dismissed the work of the Reformer as more akin to a revolution than a reformation, not recovering true Christianity but actually corrupting it: “Whatever of truth there is in the doctrine of justification by faith, is found much better stated in Augustine and the other Fathers. It is just that which Luther is said to have made more clear, that which is to him peculiar, which passes beyond the boundaries of the truth and leads to the most serious errors. Luther had no right to pronounce new doctrines. We dare not go outside the first six centuries.”³¹

Schaff continued to press Pusey regarding his narrow reliance on the Church Fathers by asking him why he could not view the work of the Reformers as a sign of growth for the Church. “Why should we remain in the child period? Does not the church represent the continuance of the life of Christ, and must she not go on developing to the full maturity of Christ’s life?” This attempt to introduce organic development was to no avail. Just like Newman, Pusey displayed an immediate abhorrence to German ideas. Schaff spent the remainder of the discussion back-peddling to defend German thought by citing the evangelically-minded Neander and Tholuck as its best representatives.³²

At the close of their conversation, Pusey expressed his wish to Schaff that he would eventually join the Oxford Movement. “When I arose to go, he expressed the hope that God, having led me thus far, would lead me still further.” Schaff retorted, “I hoped so too, but only not in the direction of Rome, but of the truth, and expressed the hope that God would use the Tractarian movement for the good of the Church Universal and bring the leaders to an appreciation of the services of the Reformation.”³³ A year later, Schaff would provide his verdict on the Oxford Movement which was perhaps based in large part to the conversation he had with Pusey: “Its mission must be regarded as preparatory only to that more full and perfect dispensation, by which in the end the captivity of Jacob is to be restored. It has done much, and may do still more, to bring the great problem of the age home to the consciousness of the Protestant

³⁰ Ibid., 89.

³¹ Ibid.

³² I.e., the school of conciliation and mediation. Ibid., 90.

³³ Ibid.

world. But for the solution of the problem itself, it is found to be utterly incompetent.”³⁴

From Near: Engaging Newman's Influence on Nevin

Robert Baird, a European commentator of the American religious scene in the mid-nineteenth century, was all but sure that the “semi-Popish doctrines” of the Oxford Movement would have little, if any, influence across the Atlantic.³⁵ Schaff was himself embarrassed by the lack of meaningful engagement his American Protestant counterparts displayed, usually boorish or indifferent, regarding the Oxford Movement. He dealt them a harsh rebuke in *Principle of Protestantism*:

Of what avail against such a life question, the true burden of the age itself, can be the hue and cry of *Popery! Romanism!* Nonsensically kept up by our intelligence and anti-intelligence prints? Grapple with the subject in earnest. Bring the fire engines. Extinguish the flame. If ye do but idly stare at it, or stand before it lamenting and railing with folded hands, assuredly it will soon burst triumphantly through the roof, and leave you at last houseless and bare. Nothing can well be more shallow and miserable, and full of senseless pretention withal, than the style in which the controversy with Popery and Puseyism, is to a great extent conducted in our religious periodicals.³⁶

This dearth in America Protestantism of scholarly interaction with the Oxford Movement came to an end in the person of John Williamson Nevin. His “five years of dizziness” (1850-1855) consisted in large part of grappling with the hard questions posed by the Oxford Movement, as well as the answers provided by its subsequent converts to Rome, including John Henry Newman. The infamous Gorham Trial of 1850 was a trigger of both the mass defection of Oxford Movement leaders to Rome and of Nevin's theological crisis.³⁷ Nevin's

³⁴ Philip Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 128.

³⁵ Robert Baird, *Religion in the United States of America* (Glasgow: Blackie and Son, 1844; reprint ed., New York: Arno Press, 1969), 506, quoted in Graham, *Cosmos in the Chaos*, 57.

³⁶ Philip Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 122.

³⁷ Darryl G. Hart, *John Williamson Nevin: High-Church Calvinist* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2005), 148. This controversy centered upon George C. Gorham, a vicar in the Anglican Church, who was prohibited from becoming a priest by his bishop, Henry Phillpotts, for not adhering to baptismal regeneration. Gorham took the case to the civil courts who ruled in his favor, stating that his position fell within the parameters of the Thirty-Nine Articles. The significance of this trial is that the English government had made a theological ruling that trumped the prerogatives of the Anglican Church. For many in the Oxford Movement, this was a major blow because the Anglican

preoccupation with the outcome of this event, so far removed from his American situation, has puzzled his biographer, James Hasting Nichols.³⁸

Two preliminary explanations for his obsession with the Gorham trial may be offered here: (1) Nevin's appreciation for Anglican sacramental theology and (2) his view of the Oxford Movement as a partner to combat the abuse of religious subjectivity (i.e., pseudo-Protestantism). First, Nevin admitted later in his life that he had always favored the practical outworkings of Anglican sacramental theology over the inward emphasis characteristically placed on the sacraments by German theologians.

...these [German] studies seem too often to stop short of what is involved for faith in the full apprehension of the Christian mystery, as a continuous presence in the world, they are found to be at certain points more or less unsatisfactory in the end to our religious feelings. Here it is that, with all our respect for German divinity, we consciously come to break with it in our thoughts, and feel the necessity of supplementing it with the more practical way of looking at Christianity which we find embodied in the ancient creeds. In this respect we freely admit our theology is more Anglican than German.³⁹

If Nevin's admission is true regarding his indebtedness to Anglican sacramental theology, it is not too difficult to imagine that he would have been interested in the proceedings and the outcome of the Gorham trial which dealt with the High-Church doctrine of baptismal regeneration!

Second, Nevin initially shared Schaff's view that the Oxford Movement was an "unsound and unsafe" system; but just like Schaff, he considered the movement to be a fellow partner in countering pseudo-Protestantism. As Mercersburg sought to deal with the abuse of religious subjectivism in the forms of revivalism, sectarianism, and rationalism in America, the Oxford Movement sought to deal with its manifestation in England in the form of a secularizing government which chipped away at the prerogatives of the Anglican church. As the "Anxious Bench" for Nevin had

claim to Apostolic Succession had clearly failed. Schaff seemed to anticipate this controversy when in January 1847 he expressed his concern for the lack of separation of church and state in the European countries, "Protestantism in Germany, Switzerland, and England certainly made a mistake in binding itself so closely to the worldly power and in transferring its episcopal rights to princes and kings. The church is called upon to bear no other yoke than the easy yoke of its bridegroom" (q.v., David Schaff, *The Life of Philip Schaff*, 140).

³⁸ This question is posed by James Hasting Nichols who observes that there does not seem to be a clear connection for why this event in England so greatly affected Nevin from afar "The Anglican Crisis' shows Nevin engaged with surprising intensity in the affairs of the Church of England, with no evidence of any local incident to explain his shift of views in the preceding spring" (q.v., Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 195).

³⁹ Nevin, *Mercersburg Review* 14 (Oct 1867): 632, quoted in Richards, "The Mercersburg Theology," 50.

become the embodiment of pseudo-Protestantism in America, the Gorham Trial had become to him the embodiment of this same abuse of religious subjectivity, only this time in the English setting.⁴⁰ Because of this, Nevin would consider the outcome of the Gorham trial as not only a loss for the Tractarians, but a blow for all of Protestantism because a major partnering movement to correct pseudo-Protestantism across the Atlantic had to him, miserably failed.⁴¹

Although these factors certainly contributed to Nevin's emotional and intellectual investment in the Gorham trial, the main cause of Nevin's "five years of dizziness" would be his exposure to John Henry Newman's ideas in *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* a little more than four years prior to the Gorham trial. As a recent convert to Catholicism, Newman coincidentally published this essay on historical development the same year (1845) that Schaff wrote his own treatise on historical development (i.e., *The Principle of Protestantism*). Nevin would openly announce his admiration for Newman's work during his theological crisis in the third article of *Early Christianity* (1852), "Few theological tracts, in the English language are more worthy of being read, or more likely to reward a diligent perusal with lasting benefit and fruit."⁴²

Why was Nevin so attracted to Newman's doctrine of development? Taking a look at Schaff's assessment of Newman's doctrine of development may shed some light on this question. After reviewing *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Schaff pronounced the main difference between Newman's doctrine of development and the Mercersburg doctrine of development, "[Newman's doctrine of development] differs very materially from ours. For in the first place, he allows this development to hold only in the Roman Catholic direction; so that Protestantism is regarded as a falling away from history, and of course an abiding progressive corruption."⁴³

Despite being a recent convert to Catholicism, Newman seemed to still possess the Tractarian appeal to antiquity, with its consequent disdain for the Reformation. as the basis for his doctrine of development. Every subsequent development in the history of the church had to be organically connected somehow to a narrow span of time in the past, i.e., the overall testimony of the Church Fathers from the second to the sixth century. There was no dialectical

⁴⁰ Hart, *Nevin: High-Church Calvinist*, 149.

⁴¹ Wentz, *Nevin: American Theologian*, 91. The "Anxious Bench" was one of the New Measures that revivalist preachers such as Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875) would use to bring people to faith. Typically, an unbeliever who was thinking about becoming a Christian was invited to come to the "Anxious Bench" which was located towards the front of the congregation; the "searcher" would sit there until they were moved to make a decision. Although the measure was very successful in bringing in professed converts, Nevin in his pamphlet, *The Anxious Bench*, was critical of it because such revivalist measures placed all the emphasis on subjective feelings and emotions and provided no room for engaging important elements of church life such as the sacraments and catechesis.

⁴² Nevin, "Early Christianity," third article, *Mercersburg Review* 4 (1852): 33.

⁴³ Philip Schaff, *What is Church History? A Vindication of the Idea of Historical Development*, 46-48 n. 1.

advancement towards the future in Newman's model.⁴⁴ Schaff bewailed how dubious this method could be as one was relegated to making strained connections to the past in order to explain how a later development was deemed as legitimate, "the slightest and most indistinct hints of Christian antiquity, are taken as sufficient proofs by themselves for the existence at the time of doctrines and practices that belong to a much later period."⁴⁵

So how did Newman's Tractarianism, re-tooled for a Catholic model of historical development, become so attractive for Nevin? Because, as Schaff always sensed, Nevin was more backward looking than forward looking in his doctrine of organic development, he was already sympathetic to the Oxford Movement's appeal to antiquity. When Newman blended historical development with his Tractarian-turned-Catholic ideas, his model contained all the necessary ingredients Nevin desired: an appeal to antiquity combined with a doctrine of development. Just as the Tractarians created their own "Trojan Horse," John Henry Newman's essay on historical development served as a trap that would eventually spring upon Nevin. It had lain dormant in his mind for several years but was then suddenly triggered by the outcome of the Gorham trial. When he saw that the Gorham trial yielding not the dialectical advancement towards the future that he expected, but rather a retrogression back into further pseudo-Protestantism, Nevin began to ponder the abandonment of the Mercersburg project in favor of the historical method laid down by Newman. This decision process affected him so greatly that Nevin did something very Newman-esque: he began dropping his academic responsibilities at Mercersburg to solely grapple the Church question. He left his teaching post in 1851, then his editor-in-chief position at *Mercersburg Review* in 1852, and finally his role as president of the college in 1853.⁴⁶ Although he left Schaff as the lone

⁴⁴ Stephen Graham provides an excellent example of how the Mercersburg school would hold the tension between organic union with the past and dialectical advancement towards the future in their creation of liturgy, "In addition, their dynamic view of historical development allowed them to insist that the liturgy should be not only historical, but at the same time modern and American." (q.v., Graham, "Nevin and Schaff," in *Reformed Confessionalism in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Sam Hamstra, Jr. and Arie J. Griffioen [New Lanham, MD.: Scarecrow Press, 1995], 82).

⁴⁵ Philip Schaff, *What is Church History? A Vindication of the Idea of Historical Development*, 46-48 n. 1.

⁴⁶ Payne, "Schaff and Nevin: The Church Question," 182. The similarities of Newman and Nevin are uncanny: both men were argumentative; both were prone to convalesce during theological crisis; both men were trained in "Puritan" forms of Christianity; both came to think in more "churchly" terms; both men experienced a sort of conversion when they began taking seriously the idea of historical development; both were sorrowful that they had said and written harsh things about Roman Catholicism; both men wrote articles showing their approval of Catholicism which greatly concerned their religious peers; both men had a period of seclusion where they considered becoming Catholic (q.v., Paul Patterson, *Nevin on Early Christianity* [Class Paper, Saint Louis University, 2004], 16). Two key differences between Newman and Nevin are highlighted by Nichols: (1) Whereas historical development was the key concept which allowed Newman to convert to Rome, this same concept ultimately prevented Nevin from doing the same; (2) the Anglican church abandoned Newman after his controversial *Tract 90*; after questioning Nevin about his eight controversial articles that he published in the *Mercersburg Review*,

theological teaching professor at Mercersburg, Schaff would defend his partner's resignation knowing that Nevin had become plagued with "conscientious doubt whether he was, just now, the man suited to educate theological youth for the service of a Protestant denomination, while the whole Church question was undergoing a radical revision in his mind."⁴⁷

During his "five years of dizziness," Nevin would write eight articles for the *Mercersburg Review* consisting of over 300 pages of work: "The Anglican Crisis" (1851), three articles on "Early Christianity" (1851-52), and four articles on "Cyprian" (1852). In each article, one can observe Nevin's estimation of the Roman Catholic Church gradually increasing, hitting its zenith in the last piece on Cyprian. "Almost all his theological writing for a year and half was devoted to the study of the ancient church, toward which he adopted much of the Roman view."⁴⁸ Nevin's articles drew the ire of his American Protestant counterparts while Roman Catholic scholars waited in glee, anticipating what seemed to be his impending conversion to Rome.⁴⁹ In recollection of the period, Schaff would admit to Theodore Appel, Nevin's biographer, that despite his support of Nevin during this turbulent time, Nevin adversely affected the Mercersburg project in penning these articles. "In any case I would like to see the chapter on Mercersburg Theology. It really began with my 'Principle of Protestantism,' but took a wrong and reactionary turn with Nevin's 'Anglican Crisis' and articles on Cyprian, etc."⁵⁰ This "wrong and reactionary turn" was Nevin's overemphasis on organic union with the past at the expense of dialectical advancement towards the future.

The sum and substance of Nevin's turn in "Anglican Crisis" and "Early Christianity" was to refute both the Anglican and Protestant historical models that defended their respective traditions as repristinations of early Christianity.⁵¹ In the articles on Cyprian, Nevin investigated the writings of this ancient African father to further expose how modern Protestantism was a far cry from the earliest Christian forms of faith; rather, modern Roman Catholicism better

the German Reformed Synod gave him latitude and support for the duration of his theological crisis (q.v., Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 198; 207-8).

⁴⁷ Letter of Philip Schaff to the editor of *Reformierte Kirchenzeitung*, quoted in *Christian Intelligencer*, 16 December 1852, quoted in Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 194-95.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 192.

⁴⁹ Charles Hodge warned Schaff to openly disassociate himself from Nevin if he wanted the Mercersburg project to survive (q.v., Charles Hodge, *Review of History of the Apostolic Church*, by Philip Schaff, *Princeton Review* 26 [1854]: 148-192, quoted in David Schaff, *Life of Philip Schaff*, 200). Orestes Brownson and James McMaster were two Catholic scholars in America who openly admitted that they prayed for the conversion of Nevin during his theological crisis (q.v., Wentz, *Nevin: American Theologian*, 26-27).

⁵⁰ Letter of Philip Schaff to "Dear Friend", 13 February 1889, quoted in Graham, "Nevin and Schaff," 79.

⁵¹ Hart, *Nevin: High-Church Calvinist*, 149, "The basic idea was that Christianity began unadulterated as a religion solely of the Bible and individual interpretation. Worship resembled that of New England or Scotland. No papacy, priesthood, liturgy, or superstitious ceremonies encumbered genuine Christianity" (149).

resembled Christianity at the time of Cyprian.⁵² It is in this central argument that Nevin imbibed of Newman's *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. Nevin certainly gleaned ideas from other thinkers such as Richard Rothe, Henrich Thiersch, Johann Adam Möhler, and Isaac Taylor, whose thought stands apparent throughout the eight articles⁵³, but it was Newman and his model of historical development which Nevin principally utilized.⁵⁴

Furthermore, Payne makes the keen observation of how Newman's theory of historical development gradually increased in Nevin's estimation during the span of his composition of the eight articles. When Nevin wrote the first article in 1851, he ended "Anglican Crisis" by providing four possible theories of historical development that were available to Protestants and Anglicans in light of the fallout of the Gorham trial. Among the four theories, Schaff's theory of organic development was his preferred choice.⁵⁵ When he wrote his third article a year later on "Early Christianity," he would again state the possible theories of historical development but this time would not grant the preferred status to Schaff's theory of organic development as he had previously. At this point, according to Payne, Newman's theory of historical development had now found equal footing to Schaff's organic development theory in the mind of Nevin who "refused at this point to decide among them, but it is fairly clear from the course of his argument in the two essays ['Early Christianity' and 'Cyprian'] that the choice was between Schaff's view and the last one described [i.e., Newman's]."⁵⁶

A classic example of Nevin's use of Newman's *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* can be seen in his first article on "Early Christianity," where he echoed one of the main arguments employed by Newman against Protestantism: "The fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries were not Protestants of either the Anglican or the Puritan school. They would have felt themselves lost, and away from home altogether, in the arms of English Episcopalianism, as well as the more bony and stern embrace of Scotch Presbyterianism."⁵⁷ This argument loomed so large for Nevin that when pressed

⁵² Ibid., *Nevin: High-Church Calvinist*, 155.

⁵³ Payne, "The Church Question," 179.

⁵⁴ Nichols points out that Nevin was basically re-stating the central principles of Newman's model of historical development in the eight articles he wrote, "His articles in this series were intended to substantiate for American Protestants the thesis of Newman's *Essay on Development*, that the type and genius of the ancient church was reproduced far more accurately by modern Roman Catholicism than by any Protestant body." (q.v., Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 200).

⁵⁵ Payne, "The Church Question," 178. The four historical models were: (1) a traditional supercessionist Protestant model, (2) a new dispensation model of revelation such as the one proposed by the Mormons, (3) a secession back to Rome based on Newman's model of historical development, and (4) Schaff's organic development model.

⁵⁶ Ibid., "The Church Question," 182.

⁵⁷ Nevin, "Early Christianity," first article, *Mercersburg Review* (1851): 489. Nevin would not only attribute this thought to Newman by giving him credit in the footnote, but he would also supply Newman's famous quote in its entirety regarding what type of church (i.e., either Protestant or Catholic) St. Athanasius and St. Ambrose would feel more at home if they were somehow brought back to life at the present time.

by Orestes Brownson to make a defense for Protestantism's connection to the Church Fathers, Nevin admitted to the Catholic scholar that he "does not see how it can be done in a fully satisfactory way."⁵⁸

Schaff grew concerned for the welfare of his partner at Mercersburg and decided to respond to Nevin's rising assessment of Newman's thought by writing an article in German in 1852, entitled "Die deutsche Theologie und die Kirchenfrage," which would be translated into English and published in the *Mercersburg Review* the following year.⁵⁹ In a surprising move, Schaff began the article by immediately conceding to Newman's argument that the early fathers would have identified more closely with modern day Roman Catholicism than with modern day Protestantism.

We must inevitably receive the impression that the Church of antiquity was in its predominant spirit and tendency, far more Catholic than Protestant, and that the Middle Ages are only a natural continuation of the Nicene Christianity. Could Ambrosius, Athanasius, Cyprian, Irenaeus, Ignatius, Clemens and Polycarp suddenly arise from their graves, and be transferred to Puritan New England, they would scarcely recognize the Christianity of those venerable Martyrs and Confessors, for which they lived and suffered.⁶⁰

Schaff went on to highlight that the doctrinal emphasis between that of the ancient Church and Protestantism differed vastly: "Even of the material principle of Protestantism, the doctrine of Justification by Faith *alone*, in Luther's sense, the Fathers know nothing, not even Augustine; and instead of making this the article of the standing and falling [of the] Church, they assign rather to the Christology, to the mystery of the Incarnation and to the Holy Trinity, the central position in the Christian system."⁶¹

Conceding all this, Schaff would pose to the reader of the essay the question of paramount importance: "How can one remain a Protestant any longer, with a good conscience, if he makes such significant concessions to the Catholic Church, regarding her as the only true Church? How can Christianity be first Catholic, then Protestant, without contradicting itself?"⁶² Schaff would respond to this question by firmly restating his theory of organic development, with special emphasis placed upon the German notion of dialectical

⁵⁸ Nevin, Letter to Orestes Brownson, 18 August 1852, Brownson Archives, Notre Dame University Press, quoted in Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 212.

⁵⁹ Payne, "The Church Question," 184. Although Schaff does not appear to be writing this essay directly to Nevin but rather to an audience aware of Nevin's struggles, Payne argues that Schaff did write "German Theology and the Church Question," the English version of the essay, with Nevin in mind and that he wrote in the third person in order that he might not publicly embarrass Nevin.

⁶⁰ Philip Schaff, "German Theology and the Church Question," *Mercersburg Review* 5 (1853): 129.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, "German Theology and the Church Question," 129.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 137.

advancement towards the future. Schaff would issue an indirect challenge to Nevin:

This is then the last but safe anchor for a Protestant divine of the German historical school. To this position has, for example, Dr. Nevin been forced, who is thoroughly acquainted with all the forms of English and German Protestantism. The Puritan, Presbyterian and Anglican historical hypotheses, have proved wholly untenable to him, and in his late articles on "Early Christianity" and "Cyprian" in the *Mercersburg Review*, he has produced arguments against them, which none of his many dissatisfied opponents have attempted to refute, and which indeed, in a historical view, so far as the main facts are concerned, can be scarcely refuted. Consequently there remains nothing for him except the German theory of Development, which, in the mean time, is held in reproach by almost all English theologians. As long as he adheres to this theory, an exodus to Rome will be impossible, as it would be a retrogression, and consequently a nullification of the fundamental law of historical development.⁶³

Schaff would use the example of human development as an analogy to substantiate the dynamism of Mercersburg's theory of organic development, in contradistinction to what he believed to be the one-dimensional nature of Newman's theory of historical development entertained by Nevin. In regard to organic union with the past, Schaff wrote, "For, in the course of her development, the Church must yet continually remain identical in her nature, and dare not advance beyond herself, without falling into heresy, and thus make the promise of Christ to her of none effect."⁶⁴ This biological analogy would certainly fit into Newman's scheme of historical development.⁶⁵ But Schaff would nuance this understanding by providing another aspect of human development that supported the Mercersburg notion of dialectical advancement towards the future: "Thus the man from childhood to old age still remains man, and each successive step is but a higher evolution of the idea contained already in the infant."⁶⁶ For Schaff, the rise of the Reformation had already been prefigured in the Apostolic Church through the ministry of the Apostle Paul. Just as Paul's ministry of freedom and subjective expression of the Gospel served as ballast to Peter's tendency to overemphasize law and authority, so did

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Schaff and Newman's notions of what constituted "identity" were different. For instance, Schaff would challenge Newman's view that the Reformation represented an utter corruption from the historic Church, "Hence it is of immense importance, that the Reformers without exception retained the Catholic Canon of Scriptures, the ancient oecumenical creeds, and especially the Apostle's Creed, and incorporated them in their own confessions, and that they stood in direct opposition to the ultra Protestant sects of their times" (q.v., *Ibid.*).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

the Reformation serve as a necessary historical corrective to Rome's similar abuse of the Petrine tendency. Schaff was trying to get across to Nevin that a conversion to Catholicism via Newman's theory of doctrinal development would not be a development but a retrogression.

Nevin never publicly responded to Schaff's article, but Payne notes that it was after the publication of Schaff's article in 1853 that Nevin began to show a more positive assessment of Protestantism.⁶⁷ In 1844, Nevin had written two essays championing the Mercersburg theory of organic development: "The Dutch Crusade" and then a review of R.I. Wilberforce's *The Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist*. By 1855, Nevin emerged out of his "five years of dizziness" firmly established in the Mercersburg fold. Payne weighs in on the possible impact of Schaff's article: "Whether Schaff's pleas and appeal to the logic of his former position grounded as it was in German philosophical and historical understanding, had a decisive impact upon Nevin or not, we cannot be certain, but, without much question, Schaff's theory, which Nevin himself had called the most persuasive argument on the behalf of Protestantism, must in the end have been on the theoretical side an important basis for his remaining Protestant."⁶⁸ Nevin would live the rest of his life in relative obscurity. He would not re-surface on the academic scene until 1866, when he resumed the presidency of the college in response to Schaff's departure from Mercersburg in 1865. In this second run at academia, as Wentz describes him, Nevin had been thoroughly exorcized of his demons from the "five years of dizziness." "There is little doubt that he had mellowed during the last twenty years of his life. Although he spoke to many of the same issues in address, sermons, and essays, he was more irenic, less concerned to vanquish his foes and refute their ideas."⁶⁹ Nevin would serve the college for ten more years before retiring in 1876. He died on June 6, 1886, at the age of 84.

Conclusion

It is common knowledge within American Reformed circles that John Williamson Nevin entertained a conversion to Roman Catholicism during his theological crisis between 1850 and 1855. What is less known are the particular theological ideas with which Nevin grappled during his "five years of dizziness"; Nevin was not merely deciding between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, but rather wrestling with a dilemma between the model of historical development as propounded by the Oxford Movement convert to Rome, John Henry Newman, and the model of organic development put forth by his partner at Mercersburg, Philip Schaff. In the end, Schaff's argument would win the day for Nevin.

Nevin should not be looked down upon for struggling over the "Church Question." In fact, we should commend his willingness to honestly weigh out the two models at the risk of being ostracized by his tradition. Nevin's

⁶⁷ Payne, "The Church Question," 187.

⁶⁸ Ibid., "The Church Question," 189.

⁶⁹ Wentz, *Nevin: American Theologian*, 29.

biographer, Theodore Appel, describes the toll that such authentic engagement placed upon Nevin's mind and body: "[the struggle] engage[d] his waking and perhaps his sleeping hours...never before, perhaps, did philosopher, scientist or theologian bestow more study or prayerful attention than be to any deep problem that called for solution."⁷⁰

It is a common misperception that the Oxford Movement never influenced the American Protestantism. This may be true of the Oxford Movement in its beginnings. But when Newman re-tooled his Tractarian ideas as a Catholic convert, adding to them a dimension of historical development, the modified Oxford Movement arguments engaged one of the great minds of American Protestantism, John Williamson Nevin.

⁷⁰ Theodore Appel, *The Life and Work of John Williamson Nevin* (Philadelphia: The Reformed Church Publishing House, 1889), 300, as quoted by Graham, "Nevin and Schaff," 72.