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# AUGUSTUS HOPKINS STRONG'S ATTEMPT TO RECONCILE ORTHODOX THEOLOGY AND MODERN PHILOSOPHY

by
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At the close of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, American theological liberals were busy carving out a "third way" between rationalistic atheism and orthodox Christianity. This middle way was based largely on twin ideas that divine authority is not tied to an inerrant book and that God should not be viewed as completely distinct from the material world.[2] When put in positive terms, this latter concept was often expressed by the phrase "divine immanence." Numerous books were written around the turn of the century arguing that the pressing theological need was to move forward toward a new understanding of God as immanent in the world and working in and through the physical universe in a way quite different from that taught by orthodox theology.[3] Conservatives firmly denounced liberal

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[2]For example, near the end of the nineteenth century John Tunis wrote, "There is a very considerable hope abroad that we shall reach a higher conception of God by looking at Him as the immanent principle of all things. Some very harsh censures are passed at the same time on the contrary and older conception of the divine transcendence. The idea is gaining ground that we shall be brought a good deal on our way by discarding all language of the Creator as distinct and apart from the creature, and by cultivating a habit of religious speech in which, if they are not identified, they are at least brought very near together" (John Tunis, "The Doctrine of the Divine Immanence," *Andover Review* 14 [October 1890]: 389). See also Francis J. McConnell, *The Diviner Immanence* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1906), 9; Hugh Ross Mackintosh, *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), 431; Arthur Cushman McGiffert, "Immanence," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings, vol. 7 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), 168–69; idem, *The Rise of Modern Religious Ideas* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 189; Henry Burton Trimble, "Christ in the Light of the Divine Immanence," *Methodist Quarterly Review* 75 (July 1926): 404; Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865–1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940), 123–25, 320.

[3]E.g., J. R. Illingworth, *Divine Immanence: An Essay on the Spiritual Significance of Matter* (New York: Macmillan, 1898); Border P. Bowne, *The Immanence of God* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1905); McConnell, *Diviner*

assertions about God's immanence as heterodox and destructive to true religion.[4] However, at least one conservative theologian, Augustus Hopkins Strong (1836–1921), attempted to wed orthodox theology to a new understanding of divine immanence. The result was something that Strong called ethical monism.

This article will briefly explore Strong's role as a mediating figure in American theology before examining his doctrine of ethical monism and the impact that this idea had on other areas of his theology. It will argue that Strong's ethical monism was an attempt to reconcile orthodox theology with a contemporary emphasis on divine immanence and that this attempt ultimately forced him to alter his theology in a distinctively unorthodox direction. In the end, his system contained irreconcilable tensions that prevented his unique theological contributions from being widely accepted.

## THE RIDDLE OF AUGUSTUS HOPKINS STRONG

Strong was in many ways a puzzling figure.[5] As president and professor of biblical theology at Rochester Theological Seminary over the course of four decades, Strong shaped a generation of seminary students.[6] As a leader among Northern Baptists, he played a significant

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*Immanence*.

[4]E.g., J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 62–64.

[5]To date a critical biography of Strong has not been written. The single most helpful source of information about Strong's life is his *Autobiography*, which he began to write on his sixtieth birthday for the benefit of his children and grandchildren (Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Autobiography of Augustus Hopkins Strong*, ed. Crerar Douglas [Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1981]). Two important monographs on Strong's thought are Carl F. H. Henry, *Personal Idealism and Strong's Theology* (Wheaton: Van Kampen Press, 1951); and Grant Wacker, *Augustus H. Strong and the Dilemma of Historical Consciousness* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985). Shorter sketches include John H. Strong, "Augustus Hopkins Strong," in *Publications of the Rochester Historical Society*, vol. 1 (Rochester, NY: Rochester Historical Society, 1922), 235–41; Kurt A. Richardson, "Augustus Hopkins Strong," in *Baptist Theologians*, ed. Timothy George and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 1990), 289–306; Gregory Alan Thornbury, "Augustus Hopkins Strong," in *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*, ed. Timothy George and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 2001), 139–62; idem, "The Legacy of Natural Theology in the Northern Baptist Theological Tradition, 1827–1918" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001), 120–74; John Andrew Aloisi, "Augustus Hopkins Strong and Ethical Monism as a Means of Reconciling Christian Theology and Modern Thought" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012), 10–60.

[6]In 1872 the trustees of Rochester Theological Seminary approached Strong about returning to his alma mater to teach theology. Strong recounted, "I was asked to accept the professorship of theology without the presidency. I declined, upon the grounds that I could not work easily unless I had affairs in my own hands. They thereupon elected me both professor and president, and I accepted the election before I returned to Cleveland" (Strong, *Autobiography*, 203). Strong served in this dual role from 1872 until his retirement in 1912.

One of Strong's sons summarized his impact on the seminary: "Dr. Strong

role in the denomination during the years leading up to the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. And as the author of numerous books, including a major systematic theology, Strong influenced the thinking of countless theologians and pastors.[7] He was by any measure an important figure in American theology at the beginning of the twentieth century. And yet, Strong has persistently baffled historians.[8]

Grant Wacker noted that Strong's interpreters have generally placed him in one of four categories.[9] They have viewed him as either (1) an early fundamentalist who was both irenic and open-minded, (2) a conservative theologian struggling to preserve Reformed orthodoxy in a modern world, (3) a mediator between liberalism and orthodox theology,[10] or (4) "a closet liberal hiding behind the garments of

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returned to Rochester in 1872. He found the Seminary in debt, meagerly equipped, and not even paying the professors' salaries. Its students were ill-prepared. When he retired after forty years it was in many respects the foremost Baptist theological seminary in the world" (John Strong, "Augustus Hopkins Strong," 238). William H. Brackney noted that Strong was "one of the most illustrious and heavily quoted Baptist theologians of his era. His wide scope of influence was due in part to the premier place in which he labored. Rochester Theological Seminary led student enrollment among the North American Baptist seminaries and boasted what was arguably the leading Baptist faculty at the end of the nineteenth century. Students arrived at Rochester from all corners of the United States and the British provinces to study theology, mostly with Strong" (*A Genetic History of Baptist Thought: With Special Reference to Baptists in Britain and North America* [Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004], 326).

[7]Strong first published his theology notes for the sake of his students in 1876 (Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Lectures on Theology* [Rochester, NY: E. R. Andrews, 1876]). These notes were later expanded into his *Systematic Theology*, which went through eight editions between its first appearance in 1886 and its final three-volume edition, which appeared 1907–1909. This work became a standard textbook in many North American seminaries throughout much of the twentieth century. And although widespread use of Strong's *Systematic Theology* tapered off toward the end of the century, it is still required reading in a number of colleges and seminaries. Some indication of Strong's influence on Baptist theology can be seen in the fact that Strong is the most frequently cited author in Henry Clarence Thiessen's *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology* (1949) and in the lesser-known *Systematic Theology* by R. V. Sarrels (1978).

[8]In the preface to Strong's *Autobiography*, Douglas noted that "Strong's influence was as diverse as the interpretations of his controversial theology" (Strong, *Autobiography*, 15).

[9]Wacker, *Strong and the Dilemma of Historical Consciousness*, 7–8.

[10]Strong appears to have viewed himself much this way. Near the end of his life, he once described his theological position by stating: "My views are midway between two opposite extremes. Both sides fire into me, while I am only the more convinced that my middle ground is the only correct position" (Augustus Hopkins Strong, "My Views of the Universe in General," *The Baptist*, 29 May 1920, 625). And in a posthumously published book, Strong sought to distinguish himself from both the fundamentalists and the higher critics before suggesting that the answer lay somewhere between the two groups (Augustus Hopkins Strong, *What Shall I Believe? A Primer of Christian Theology* [New York: Revell, 1922], 62–63). Irwin Reist believed that Strong was "attempting to mediate between the old orthodoxy which was hardening

apparent orthodoxy."[11]

Part of the reason for the difficulty involved in interpreting Strong can be found in some of his own enigmatic statements and actions. Near the end of his life Strong once wrote, "I am an evolutionist, but evolutionist of a peculiar sort.... I am a higher critic, but of a certain sort.... I am both a premillennialist and a postmillennialist, strange as this may seem to some."[12] If these self-appellations appeared somewhat less than consistent, so did a number of decisions that he made during his presidency at Rochester. For example, during the 1880s Strong along with several other faculty members at Rochester expressed serious concern about the orthodoxy of their promising young student Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918). Strong once told Rauschenbusch that an essay he had written on Bushnell's theory of the atonement was of very high quality but that he judged it "to be subversive of scripture."[13] In fact the theological errors that Strong detected in this essay prompted him to offer several "corrective lectures" to the entire class.[14] Nor was this the only time Rauschenbusch expressed his affinity for unorthodox views during his student days. Shortly before graduation, Rauschenbusch preached a chapel sermon in which he described personal conversion in terms of liberal presuppositions.[15] As Rauschenbusch graduated, Strong had significant reservations about his student's doctrinal fidelity. Nonetheless about a decade later, Strong hired Rauschenbusch to teach at Rochester, even though the younger man had continued the departure from orthodoxy begun in his seminary days.[16] If Rauschenbusch

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into fundamentalism and the new liberalism which seemed to be losing the core of the Christian confession" ("Augustus Hopkins Strong and William Newton Clarke," *Foundations* 13 [January–March 1970]: 28). And concerning Strong, James Hastings once wrote, "He is conservative but not cramped, liberal but not loose" (review of *Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism*, by Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Expository Times* 11 [1900]: 316).

[11]Wacker, *Strong and the Dilemma of Historical Consciousness*, 8. See ibid., 7–8, for representatives of each of these views.

[12]Strong, "My Views of the Universe in General," 625.

[13]Christopher Hodge Evans, *The Kingdom Is Always but Coming: A Life of Walter Rauschenbusch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 40. Strong's own assessment of Bushnell's view of the atonement can be found in Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium Designed for the Use of Theological Students*, 3 vols. in 1 (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1907), 733–40.

[14]Paul M. Minus, *Walter Rauschenbusch: American Reformer* (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 44.

[15]Evans, *Kingdom Is Always but Coming*, 40. Rauschenbusch graduated from the seminary in 1886.

[16]Ibid., 124. Even as Strong extended the job offer to Rauschenbusch he was concerned about the younger man's liberal proclivities. As Evans has pointed out, among the factors that troubled Strong was Rauschenbusch's view of the atonement: "The two men apparently exchanged their perspectives on the doctrine of the atonement, and Strong worried that Rauschenbusch did not give enough credence to the power of the cross to forgive sinners" (ibid., 72). Rauschenbusch and Strong

were the only modernist whom Strong added to the Rochester faculty one might regard it as an isolated lapse of judgment. But he was not. During his forty-year tenure Strong also hired other liberal scholars such as William Arnold Stevens (1877), Walter R. Betteridge (1891), J. W. A. Stewart (1903), Cornelius Woelfkin (1905), and Conrad Henry Moehlman (1907).[17]

Another factor contributing to the dilemma of interpreting Strong stems from the fact that his theology evolved considerably during his career at Rochester.[18] The most significant change in his theology occurred in the early- to mid-1890s when he developed an idea that he called "ethical monism."[19] Strong eventually came to regard this concept as "the key to theology."

## ETHICAL MONISM

Strong announced his discovery of ethical monism in a series of three articles published in the New York City *Examiner* in 1894 and 1895.[20] He began the first of these articles with a statement suggesting

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maintained a good relationship throughout their careers at Rochester, and a few years after Strong's retirement Rauschenbusch dedicated his *Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917) to Strong, "a theologian whose best beloved doctrine has been the mystic union with Christ."

[17]LeRoy Moore Jr., "Academic Freedom: A Chapter in the History of the Colgate Rochester Divinity School," *Foundations* 10 (January–March 1967): 66. Moore describes Woelfkin as "the chief spokesman for Baptist liberals during the fundamentalist controversy" and Moehlman as "an unrepentant modernist to the day of his death" (ibid.). Thornbury has rightly noted that although Strong considered his own theology to be a defense of theological orthodoxy his "appointments include some of the most noted theological liberals in Northern Baptist life in the early twentieth century" ("Legacy of Natural Theology," 175). Interestingly, in his *Autobiography* Strong suggests that his tenure at Rochester was marked by orthodoxy while his hiring of liberal faculty members is silently passed over. His only mention of Rauschenbusch is as a friend of his eldest son, Charles, who incidentally abandoned the Christian faith (*Autobiography*, 255–56, 260).

[18]Carl Henry traced Strong's theological development through three different periods, which he believed reflected Strong's "early, middle, and late convictions" (*Personal Idealism and Strong's Theology*, 15).

[19]As late as January 1888, Strong argued directly against any type of monism (Augustus Hopkins Strong, "Modern Idealism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 45 [1888]: 84–109). Wacker discusses possible explanations for this change in Strong's thinking, but he ultimately concludes that the reasons why Strong adopted ethical monism so quickly are unknown (*Strong and the Dilemma of Historical Consciousness*, 60–62).

[20]Strong had delivered the substance of the first of these articles at a theological conference in 1892, and he had hinted at ethical monism in his 1893 presidential address to the American Baptist Missionary Union. But after "trembling on the brink" for two years, he first published his views on ethical monism in 1894. In the end he had concluded that intellectual honesty required him to publish his views even if doing so cost him his position at Rochester (Strong, *Autobiography*, 254). These three articles were soon republished in a separate volume as *Ethical Monism in Two Series of Three Articles Each and Christ in Creation with a Review by Elias H. Johnson* (New York: Examiner, 1896) and again in Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Christ in Creation and*

that a change had taken place in his own thinking: "Theology is a progressive science, not because the truth itself changes, but because human apprehension and statement of the truth improve from age to age."[21] Strong realized that his readers might deem some of his views quite novel, but he assured them that "the unfolding of the subject will certainly enlarge our conceptions of the unsearchable riches of Christ and convince us more fully than ever before that in him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."[22] Strong believed that ethical monism provided a new and better way of understanding God's relationship to the world.

Strong's explanation of ethical monism did not change substantially over the years. In the final edition of his *Systematic Theology*, Strong defined ethical monism as a "method of thought which holds to a single substance, ground, or principle of being, namely, God, but which also holds to the ethical facts of God's transcendence as well as his immanence, and of God's personality as distinct from, and as guaranteeing, the personality of man."[23] Strong viewed his doctrine of ethical monism as striking the proper and difficult balance between the truth of God's transcendence and the reality of his immanence in the world.

Strong thought that ethical monism brought many benefits to the theological table. He believed that it provided a new and stronger argument for the existence of God.[24] And he thought it could enable

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*Ethical Monism* (Philadelphia: Roger Williams Press, 1899), 1–15, 16–50, 51–86. For ease of reference, this final source will be cited when reference is made to these three articles.

Ethical monism is absent in the first four editions of Strong's *Systematic Theology*. However, in the fifth and subsequent editions of his *Systematic Theology* Strong gradually incorporated ethical monism into his system. For a critical evaluation of the fifth edition of Strong's *Systematic Theology*, see Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, review of *Systematic Theology* (5th ed., 1896), by Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 8 (April 1897): 356–58. And for reviews of Strong's *Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism*, see James Iverach, review of *Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism*, by Augustus Hopkins Strong, *The Critical Review of Theological & Philosophical Literature* 10 (1900): 387–90; and Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, review of *Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism*, by Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 12 (April 1901): 325–26. One of the earliest substantive responses to Strong's ethical monism is A. J. F. Behrends, "Ethical Monism," *Methodist Review* 77 (May–June 1895): 357–70.

[21]Strong, *Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism*, 1.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Idem, *Systematic Theology* (1907), 105.

[24]Strong wrote, "The old argument proceeded from effect to cause, and looked upon the great Artificer as creating a universe outside of himself, and then fashioning and directing it from without. That argument had the disadvantage of not being able to show that the universe, at least so far as its substance is concerned, ever had a beginning…. The new argument avoids this difficulty. It takes the analogy of the soul and its relation to the body. How do I know that my brother has a soul? I cannot see the soul, I cannot hear it, I cannot touch it. All I see, hear, or touch is physical. Yet, knowing myself as spirit, and knowing my body as a mere instrument of my spirit, I

scholars to solve some of the still unanswered questions of theology.[25] But even more importantly Strong believed that ethical monism was a necessary means of defending Christianity from the onslaughts of modern philosophy. Explaining the pressing need to adopt ethical monism, Strong wrote, "Monism is, without much doubt, the philosophy of the future, and the only question would seem to be whether it shall be an ethical and Christian, or a non-ethical and anti-Christian monism."[26] Failure to adjust to the changes taking place in modern thought would have disastrous consequences, Strong continued, for

> if we refuse to recognize this new movement of thought and to capture it for Christ, we may find that materialism and pantheism perversely launch their craft upon the tide and compel it to further their progress. Let us tentatively accept the monistic principle and give to it a Christian interpretation. Let us not be found fighting against God. Let us use the new light that is given us, as a means of penetrating more deeply into the meaning of Scripture.[27]

As Strong soon discovered, many conservatives were not convinced that ethical monism was the right answer to either the unsettled dilemmas of theology or the challenges of modern thought.

Strong's adoption of ethical monism cost him the good will of more than a few friends and fellow theologians. As Crerar Douglas noted in the preface to Strong's *Autobiography*,

> For reasons which most of his friends and associates never understood, Strong broke with conservatives by announcing that he had become an "ethical monist." Many of his followers could not understand Strong's new ethical monism, and many others who did understand it did not approve of it.[28]

But Strong was not turning back. Having announced his discovery, Strong clung to it tenaciously as he sought to explain and defend it in numerous publications. Most of these writings were of a theological or philosophical nature. But he also had a personal interest in vindicating

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see in my brother's face and gestures, I hear in the tones of his voice, I feel in the warm grasp of his hand, the signs of a thinking, loving, willing soul, like my own. So the whole world of nature is a sign-language. The milky-way is God's sign-manual written across the heavens. I do not need to go back to the origin of nature to prove the existence of God, any more than I need to go back to my brother's birth to prove that there is a soul behind that kindly face of his" (idem, *Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism*, 12–13).

[25]Ibid., 29–30.

[26]Ibid., 22.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Strong, *Autobiography*, 12. On the other hand, Strong's announcement was greeted warmly by philosophical idealists such as George Howison. See Josiah Royce, Joseph Le Conte, G. H. Howison, and Sidney Edward Mezes, *The Conception of God* (New York: Macmillan, 1897), xxix.

ethical monism as the culmination of his theology. As the editor of Strong's *Autobiography* pointed out, "In his *Autobiography* Strong set out to show that ethical monism was, in fact, the goal toward which his spiritual life had been moving all along."[29]

From the start, Strong's critics accused him of advocating a thinly disguised form of pantheism.[30] Apparently anticipating this charge, Strong attempted to distinguish ethical monism from pantheism in his initial article on the subject. Agreeing with the apostle Paul, Strong asserted, "God is *above* all things as well as *in* all things and *through* all things." Ethical monism accepted this entire statement as true, but Strong noted, "This is what pantheism denies. It holds to God's immanence without qualifying this by God's transcendence. It regards God as exhaustively expressed in the universe."[31] In distinction from pantheism, Strong's ethical monism saw God as both immanent and transcendent, as both in nature and above nature.[32]

In an early article on ethical monism, Strong summarized his view in an effort to show how it differed from pantheism:

> There is but one substance—God. The eternal Word, whom in his historic manifestation we call Christ, is the only complete and perfect expression of God. The universe is Christ's finite and temporal manifestation of God. The universe is not itself God—it is only the partial unfolding of God's wisdom and power, adapted to the comprehension of finite intelligences.[33]

Then he stated, "This is not pantheism, for pantheism is not simply monism, but monism coupled with two denials, the denial of the personality of God and the denial of the transcendence of God."[34] If Strong had stopped here, he might have had fewer critics, at least from the conservative side. But he went on to explain himself further,

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[29]Strong, *Autobiography*, 12.

[30]E.g., Behrends, "Ethical Monism," 357, 360–61; Warfield, review of *Systematic Theology* (5th ed., 1896), 358. Warfield believed that Strong's "pantheizing idealism" was "saved from its worst extremes by the force of old habits of thought" (ibid.). Strong recounted that while he received many favorable letters in response to his early writings on ethical monism, he was denounced by others as a pantheist and a Buddhist (*Autobiography*, 255).

[31]Strong, *Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism*, 4. Strong later defined pantheism as "that method of thought which conceives of the universe as the development of one intelligent and voluntary, and yet impersonal, substance, which reaches consciousness only in man" (*Systematic Theology* [1907], 100).

[32]Strong, *Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism*, 64.

[33]Ibid., 45.

[34]Ibid. In similar fashion, Strong wrote, "This Ethical Monism is not pantheism, because it maintains the separate personality of man and the absolute transcendence of God…. Pantheism is indeed monism, but monism is not necessarily pantheism. Pantheism is monism coupled with two denials: the denial of man's separate personality and of God's transcendence" (ibid., 60–61). See also idem, *Miscellanies,* 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Griffith & Rowland, 1912), 2:32.

> My doctrine takes the grain of truth in pantheism, namely, its monistic element, while it maintains in opposition to pantheism the personality of God and the personality of man, though it regards the latter as related to the former, somewhat as the persons of the Trinity are related to the one all-inclusive divine personality.[35]

Strong saw a parallel between the relationship of human personality to the divine personality and the relationship of the three divine persons to the divine nature. Earlier Strong had defended this analogy by asking a question, "If in the one substance of God, there are three *infinite* personalities, why may there not be in that same substance multitudinous *finite* personalities?"[36] He concluded that no consistent Trinitarian could deny this possibility.[37]

Strong recognized that his doctrine of ethical monism could be easily misunderstood. Therefore, drawing a different kind of analogy, this time from the historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity, he argued that when other theological ideas are properly understood, ethical monism will be properly understood as well. He explained,

> The full acknowledgment of this doctrine of one substance had to be delayed for the same reason that the Trinity was not more clearly revealed to the Old Testament saints—preparatory doctrines needed to be taught first. In the education of the race the teaching of God's unity had to precede the teaching of God's trinity, because, otherwise trinity would have been interpreted as polytheism. So the teaching of human personality, freedom, responsibility, sin, has had to precede *the teaching that man is of one substance with God*, because, otherwise, consubstantiality would have been interpreted as pantheism.[38]

Although Strong saw hints of ethical monism throughout the history of theology, he admitted that it had not been fully given to humans until they were ready to receive it. But he perceived that the church was now ready for the idea, and he believed that a theologian with a correct understanding of the nature of human personality, freedom, and sin could accept the truth of human-divine consubstantiality without conflating it with pantheism.

The real sticking point for many conservatives was Strong's belief in the existence of only one substance. This seemed to imply that while God might be greater than the universe, the created universe is substantially identified with God. Still trying to distinguish ethical monism from pantheism, Strong wrote, "Ethical Monism holds that the universe, instead of being one with God and conterminous with God, is but a finite, partial and progressive manifestation of the divine

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[35]Strong, *Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism*, 45.

[36]Ibid., 30.

[37]Ibid.

[38]Ibid., 50 (emphasis added).

Life."[39] Using still another analogy, Strong explained, "The universe is related to God as my thoughts are related to me, the thinker. I am greater than my thoughts, and my thoughts vary in moral value."[40] Therefore, Strong implied that as humans are both related to and greater than their thoughts so also God is related to and greater than his creation. While the universe is related to God and wholly dependent upon him, it is a temporal manifestation of the divine being while God himself is eternal.[41]

Strong struggled to find words to explain ethical monism in a way that distinguished it from pantheism and yet still communicated the relationship between Christ and creation that he envisioned. In the end, many conservatives concluded that he was treading dangerously close to pantheism, if indeed, he had managed to avoid it.

## THEOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF ETHICAL MONISM

Strong's ethical monism had important repercussions for his overall theology.[42] He admitted as much when he stated that ethical monism "furnishes the basis for a new interpretation of many theological as well as of many philosophical doctrines."[43] The impact of ethical monism on Strong's larger theology can be seen in his later discussions of evolution, miracles, and the atonement of Christ.

### Evolution as the Method of God

Strong's acceptance of some type of theistic evolution predated his discovery of ethical monism. In a published edition of his theology lecture notes in 1876, Strong described his understanding of the creation account as a "pictorial-summary interpretation."[44] For Strong this

[39]Strong, *Systematic Theology* (1907), 107. Elsewhere Strong explained what he meant by describing the universe as a manifestation of God: "The universe is a manifestation of God, but it is not God; much less can we give the name of God to any single thing or any single being in the universe. All things, all persons, all nations, all worlds are only the partial, temporal, graded, finite unfoldings of a Being infinitely greater than they" (idem, *Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism*, 64).

[40]Strong, *Systematic Theology* (1907), 107.

[41]Idem, *Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism*, 45.

[42]As Warfield noted in 1897, ethical monism "must eat deeper into the system or again recede from it" (review of *Systematic Theology* [5th ed., 1896], 358). It never receded from Strong's theological system.

[43]Strong, *Systematic Theology* (1907), 109. In the preface to the final edition of his *Systematic Theology*, Strong wrote, "My philosophical and critical point of view meantime has also somewhat changed [since the 1886 ed.]. While I still hold to the old doctrines, I interpret them differently and expound them more clearly, because I seem to myself to have reached a fundamental truth which throws new light upon them all" (ibid., vii).

[44]Strong, *Lectures on Theology*, 99.

meant that biblical revelation was "given in pregnant language, so that it could expand to all the ascertained results of subsequent physical research."[45] He then proceeded to give "an approximate account of the coincidences between the Mosaic and the geological records."[46] Strong worked his way through the various stages of the geological record as understood by contemporary science and sought to explain how statements in Genesis chapter one corresponded to the scientific consensus.[47] He described various classifications of the plant and animal kingdoms as fitting into specific stages of geological progress and concluded that man as "the first being of moral and intellectual qualities, and the first in whom the great design has full expression, forms in both the Mosaic and the geologic record, the last step of progress in creation."[48] Strong did not view humankind as a product of "unreasoning natural forces" but rather as deriving his existence from "the creative act of God."[49] This belief did not automatically rule out the possibility that humans had evolved from lower species because, as he wrote, "the Scriptures do not disclose the method of man's creation."[50] Therefore, he noted, "Whether man's physical system is, or is not, derived by natural descent, from the lower animals, the record of creation does not inform us."[51] At this early stage in his career, while admitting the possibility that humanity's "physical system" was a product of evolution, Strong preferred to see both man's body and soul as results of immediate creation.[52] However, twenty years later Strong was quite comfortable viewing humans as evolved from lower life forms.[53]

On July 23, 1878, Strong delivered an address before the Literary Societies of Colby University that he titled "The Philosophy of Evolution."[54] In this speech Strong critiqued the atheistic views of Herbert Spencer, but also informed his listeners that he considered himself an evolutionist. He remarked,

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[45]Ibid.

[46]Ibid.

[47]Ibid., 99–100.

[48]Ibid., 100.

[49]Ibid., 121.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Ibid.

[52]Ibid., 121–22.

[53]In a paper that he delivered in 1898, Strong stated, "The dust from which the body of Adam was made was animate dust; lower forms of life were taken as the foundation upon which to build man's physical frame and man's rational powers; into some animal germ came the breath of a new intellectual and moral life" (idem, *Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism*, 169).

[54]This address was published in Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Philosophy and Religion: A Series of Addresses, Essays and Sermons Designed to Set Forth Great Truths in Popular Form* (New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1888), 39–57.

> We are ourselves evolutionists then, within certain limits…. We gratefully appropriate whatever science can prove…. We know that gravitation does not take the universe out of the hands of God, but only reveals the method of the divine working. So, the day is past, in our judgment, when thoughtful men can believe that there was a creative fiat of God at the introduction of every variety of vegetable and animal life. God may work by means, and a law of variation and of natural selection may have been and probably was the method in which his great design in the vast majority of living forms was carried out.[55]

Prior to embracing ethical monism, Strong's system attempted to reconcile the creation account with the claims of modern science, but he lacked a means of bringing the two together in a consistent fashion. His discovery of ethical monism in the 1890s provided a hermeneutic that enabled him to more consistently integrate contemporary views about evolution into his theological system.[56]

For years Strong had argued that theistic evolution should not be viewed as a threat to the Christian religion, but now he presented his case with greater conviction. He had found a better way to explain how the Christian faith incorporated and even explained the idea of evolution. He wrote, "Evolution has new light thrown upon it from the point of view of Ethical Monism. It is disarmed of all its terrors for theology the moment it is regarded as only the common method of Christ our Lord."[57] In Strong's view, evolution in no way undercut belief in the existence of God. As he explained it, "Evolution does not make the idea of a Creator superfluous, because evolution is only the method of God."[58] He held that the concept of evolution could not be properly defended apart from belief in God and that ethical monism could more fully explain evolution.

In his earliest published discussion of ethical monism, Strong noted ethical monism's main implication for evolutionary thought. He pointed out that "Darwin was able to assign no reason why the development of living forms should be upward rather than downward, toward cosmos rather than chaos."[59] Strong believed that Darwin's weakness lay in the fact that he lacked the truth of ethical monism. As Strong put it, "If Darwin had recognized Christ as the omnipresent life and law of the world, he would not have been obliged to pass his hands across his eyes in despair of comprehending the marks of wisdom in the universe."[60] For Strong ethical monism revealed the answer to Darwin's dilemma by recognizing the immanent Christ as the power behind

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[55]Ibid., 45.

[56]Thornbury, "Legacy of Natural Theology," 158.

[57]Strong, *Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism*, 71.

[58]Idem, *Systematic Theology* (1907), 466.

[59]Idem, *Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism*, 11.

[60]Ibid.

evolutionary progress.

In ethical monism, Strong had found a new way to reconcile the Christian faith with modern ideas about evolution. By viewing the immanent Christ as working through evolution, Strong believed he could explain why evolution was taking place. In the end, Strong assigned a new role to Christ when he wrote, "Christ, the wisdom and the power of God, is the principle of evolution, as he is the principle of gravitation and induction."[61] If ethical monism had helped Strong reconcile evolution and theology, it had done so only by significantly altering both.

### Miracles as Properly Defined

When Strong published his lecture notes in 1876, he provided the following definition of a miracle: "A miracle is an event palpable to the senses, produced for a religious purpose by the immediate agency of God; an event therefore, which though not contravening any law of nature, the laws of nature, if fully known, would not be competent to explain."[62] However, just two years later he gave a rather different definition when he stated, "A miracle is an event in nature, so extraordinary in itself and so coinciding with the prophecy or command of a religious teacher or leader, as fully to warrant the conviction, on the part of those who witness it, that God has wrought it with the design of certifying that this teacher or leader has been commissioned by him."[63] The first definition appeared in each edition of Strong's *Systematic Theology* prior to his adoption of ethical monism; of the two definitions, it was apparently the one he preferred. However, in the final edition of his *Systematic Theology*, Strong repeated the first definition almost verbatim, but he designated this statement as only a "preliminary definition."[64] He then included the second definition and labeled it an "alternative and preferable definition" of a miracle. Although Strong had formulated both definitions early in his theological career, the preferable definition—which left out all reference to the laws of nature and the immediate agency of God and instead emphasized the "extraordinary" nature of the event—better reflected his later understanding of God's relationship to nature via ethical monism.[65]

Strong gave five reasons why this definition was superior to the one that had appeared in earlier editions of his theology text. Concerning

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[61]Ibid., 20.

[62]Idem, *Lectures on Theology*, 33.

[63]Idem, *Philosophy and Religion*, 132. Strong offered this definition in an essay that he delivered at a pastors' conference on October 23, 1878.

[64]Idem, *Systematic Theology* (1907), 117.

[65]This definition also appears in Augustus, Hopkins Strong, "The Miracle at Cana: With an Attempt at a Philosophy of Miracles," in *Addresses on the Gospel of St. John* (Providence, RI: St. John Conference Committee, 1906), 69.

the preferred definition, he wrote,

> (a) It recognizes the immanence of God and his immediate agency in nature, instead of assuming an antithesis between the laws of nature and the will of God.
> (b) It regards the miracle as simply an extraordinary act of that same God who is already present in all natural operations and who in them is revealing his general plan.
> (c) It holds that natural law, as the method of God's regular activity, in no way precludes unique exertions of his power when these will best secure his purpose in creation.
> (d) It leaves it possible that all miracles may have their natural explanations and may hereafter be traced to natural causes, while both miracles and their natural causes may be only names from the one and self-same will of God.
> (e) It reconciles the claims of both science and religion: of science, by permitting any possible or probable physical antecedents of the miracle; of religion, by maintaining that these very antecedents together with the miracle itself are to be interpreted as signs of God's special commission to him under whose teaching or leadership the miracle is wrought.[66]

Most of these reasons related directly to Strong's understanding of ethical monism. Strong did not view miracles as either a violation or a suspension of natural law. Nor did he see them as the supernatural work of a Creator who is distinct from his creation. Instead Strong held that miracles should be seen as belonging to a higher order of nature. This higher order of nature, he believed, is not separate from the immanent God but rather is part of the divine will.

Strong did not develop a completely new definition of miracles after his acceptance of ethical monism, but he did alter his *Systematic Theology* to reflect his new preference for a definition that more readily fit an emphasis on divine immanence. And most of the reasons Strong gave for preferring this definition indicate that ethical monism underlay the change.

### The Atonement as a Necessary Suffering

Strong's later discussions of evolution and miracles reflected his ethical monism, but his view of the atonement was the area of theology that was most significantly impacted by ethical monism. And by his own account, it was the doctrine of the atonement that actually pushed

[66]Strong, *Systematic Theology* (1907), 118–19. These same reasons for so defining a miracle also appear in Strong, "Miracle at Cana," 69. In an address delivered on November 11, 1903, Strong stated, "Even though all miracle were proved to be a working of nature, the Christian argument would not one whit be weakened, for still miracle would evidence the extraordinary working of the immanent God, who is none other than Jesus Christ…. Our unreadiness to accept this naturalistic interpretation of the miracle results wholly from our inveterate habit of dissociating nature from God, and of practically banishing God from his universe" (Strong, "Miracle at Cana," 68).

him in the direction of ethical monism. As he put it, "I accept Ethical Monism because of the light which it throws upon the atonement rather than for the sake of its Christian explanation of evolution."[67]

In his earliest theological notes, Strong described his view of the atonement as the "ethical theory of the atonement."[68] He summarized it as follows:

> This holds that the necessity of an atonement is grounded in the holiness of God. There is an ethical principle in the divine nature, which demands that sin shall be punished.… There is an ethical demand of God's nature that penalty follow sin.… The atonement is therefore a satisfaction of the ethical demand of the divine nature by the substitution of Christ's penal sufferings for the punishment of the guilty.[69]

Although Strong embraced the ethical theory of the atonement throughout his career and continued to speak about it using the words just quoted, he later explained this view quite differently.

Strong felt very keenly the charge that the suffering of the innocent Savior in place of the guilty is unjust.[70] In a posthumously published book, Strong wrote, "To me it has been the greatest problem of theology, to explain *God's imputation to Christ of the sins of the whole race*."[71] Early on Strong shared William Shedd's realistic view of the transmission of sin, and so he consulted Shedd privately about how to resolve the tension created by the suffering of the sinless Christ for sinners.[72] Shedd simply told Strong that it was a "mystery of God."[73] Strong was dissatisfied with this answer, and so he kept looking for a solution. Eventually he discovered it in ethical monism. Reflecting on his own theological development, Strong wrote,

> I wanted to find some union of Christ with humanity which would make this imputation also realistic and biological. I have found it, and have expounded it in my book entitled, *"Christ in Creation."* It is my chief contribution to scientific theology…it is by my explanation of God's

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[67]Strong, *Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism*, 78.

[68]Idem, *Lectures on Theology*, 194.

[69]Ibid., 194–95.

[70]Idem, *Philosophy and Religion*, 213. Elsewhere Strong stated, "For many years my classes propounded to me the question: How could Christ justly bear the sins of mankind? The theories which held to a mechanical transfer of guilt became increasingly untenable" (idem, *Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism*, 78).

[71]Strong, *What Shall I Believe?* 93. As this quotation suggests, Strong held to a universal atonement. See also Strong, *Lectures on Theology*, 196; idem, *Systematic Theology* (1907), 771–73.

[72]For further discussion of imputation in the theology of Shedd and Strong, see Oliver D. Crisp, "Federalism vs Realism: Charles Hodge, Augustus Strong and William Shedd on the Imputation of Sin," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 (January 2006): 55–71.

[73]Strong, *What Shall I Believe?* 93.

> imputation of all human sin to Christ that my theology must stand or fall.[74]

Strong viewed ethical monism and its explanation of the atonement as central to his later theology.

On the basis of ethical monism, Strong no longer simply spoke of the atonement as a substitution. He now spoke of it as both a substitution and a sharing. He wrote,

> We acknowledge that our conceptions of atonement have suffered some change. To our fathers the atonement was a mere historical fact, a sacrifice offered in a few brief hours upon the Cross. It was a literal substitution of Christ's suffering for ours, the payment of our debt by another, and upon the ground of that payment we are permitted to go free…. All this is true. But it is only part of the truth…. We must add to the idea of *substitution* the idea of *sharing*. Christ's doing and suffering is not that of one external and foreign to us. He is bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh; the bearer of humanity; yes, the very life of the race.[75]

This statement included more changes to Strong's view of the atonement than may at first meet the eye.

By speaking about the atonement as a sharing, Strong meant that he saw Christ not as bearing foreign guilt but rather as bearing guilt that was his own.[76] In fact, as the life of the human race, Strong believed that Christ was necessarily "responsible with us for the sins of the race."[77] In the 1880s, Strong tied Christ's inheritance of human guilt to the incarnation.[78] At this early stage, Strong believed that Christ could have avoided human guilt in a couple of ways:

> He might have declined to join himself to humanity, and then he need not have suffered. He might have sundered his connection to the race, and then he need not have suffered. But once born of the Virgin, and possessed of the human nature that was under the curse, he was bound to suffer. The whole mass and weight of God's displeasure against the race fell on him, once he became a member of the race.[79]

Here Strong saw Christ's inherited guilt as a result of the incarnation. But having accepted ethical monism, Strong no longer saw the incarnation as the means by which Christ was united to the race and thus entailed in human guilt. Strong now understood Christ as united to the race prior to the Fall.[80] As he explained it, "Christ's union with the race

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[74]Ibid.

[75]Strong, *Systematic Theology* (1907), 715.

[76]The guilt that Strong saw Christ bearing "was not only an imputed, but also an imparted guilt" (ibid., 759).

[77]Ibid., 715.

[78]Idem, *Philosophy and Religion*, 214.

[79]Ibid.

[80]Idem, *Systematic Theology* (1907), 715.

in his incarnation is only the outward and visible expression of a prior union with the race which began when he created the race."[81]

Not only did Strong see Christ's union with the human race as beginning at the creation of the race, he also saw Christ's suffering for sins as beginning at the Fall. He wrote, "So through all the course of history, Christ, the natural life of the race, has been afflicted in the affliction of humanity and has suffered for human sins…. This suffering has been an atoning suffering, since it has been due to righteousness."[82] For Strong this meant that the atonement predated the incarnation of Christ. He explained, "Christ therefore, as incarnate, rather revealed the atonement than made it."[83] In Strong's view, Christ's death on the cross was not itself the atonement. His death was merely "the revelation of the atonement."[84] Strong believed that Christ's atonement began when the Fall occurred and continued up through the cross, which was a revelation of Christ's age-long suffering for sins.

Strong's later view of the atonement was a novel attempt to explain how Christ could justly bear the sins of guilty humans. By tying Christ's union with humanity to creation rather than the incarnation and by viewing Christ as organically united to the race as its very life, Strong could argue that Christ had justly inherited the guilt (though not the depravity) of human sin when the Fall occurred. And on these same bases he could also argue that Christ began atoning for human sins long before his incarnation. Ethical monism had provided Strong with a new way to answer difficult questions about the justice of imputation and the necessity of the atonement.

## CONCLUSION

As a conservative theologian living at the end of the nineteenth century, Strong felt the pull of modern philosophy toward a new emphasis on divine immanence. In light of this attraction, he attempted to reconcile contemporary thought with orthodox theology by means of an idea he called ethical monism. This way of thinking viewed reality as consisting of one divine substance that contained numerous distinct personalities and therefore preserved the idea of God's transcendence while stressing his immanence in creation. He believed that ethical monism could both capture the modern emphasis on divine immanence and at the same time provide new answers to some of the difficult problems of theology. This led him to reformulate his explanations of evolution, miracles, and the atonement of Christ. In the end, ethical monism forced Strong to alter major areas of his theology in a direction quite foreign to Christian orthodoxy.

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[81]Ibid., 758. See also idem, *Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism*, 34.

[82]Strong, *Christ in Creation and Ethical Monism*, 173.

[83]Idem, *Systematic Theology* (1907), 762.

[84]Ibid., 715.