

Horace Bushnell's Sense of American Theology (in Its Diversity) as an Interpretive Order

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Perhaps a little prematurely for his time (as he himself might assert), Horace Bushnell stumbled across the theological urgency of the hermeneutical dilemma: if all the world is interpretation, which interpretation is the right one? Since his college years at Yale, as he struggled with ancient tongues and first encountered Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*, Bushnell developed a considered skepticism about the reliability of the very language that the theological debates going on around him were composed of. Over the course of his career, language came to appear in his writing as a thing incapable of fully grasping the supernatural realities it reaches at, whose meaning depends on a subjective intuition more akin to the reading of poetry than the discovery of essential laws. This sensibility, as contagious as it was repugnant (to many), was at the heart of what made Bushnell such a transitional figure who, while unstitching the certainty of antebellum orthodoxy, made way for later Protestant liberalism, as well as its fundamentalist answer.

As has been often repeated by later scholars, Bushnell's daughter Mary Bushnell Cheney enshrines the centrality of language in her biography-cum-compendium, *Life and Letters of Horace Bushnell*, first quoting from the "Preliminary Dissertation on Language" in *God in Christ*:

"for," he says, "if these views of language have been historically introductory to me, it is hardly possible that others will enter fully into my position without any introduction at all." And these views are equally necessary to a vital understanding of all his future writings, for upon this foundation the whole structure was reared; or, in another sense, they form the key-stone, without which the arch would lack coherence and solidity. *Here, we repeat with emphasis, is the key to Horace Bushnell*, to the whole scheme of his thought, to that peculiar manner of expression which marked his individuality,—in a word, to the man.¹

Robert Bruce Mullin's argument is well taken that the key to Bushnell's theological thought may be his theory of nature and the supernatural rather than, as Bushnell and his daughter both

¹ *Life and Letters of Horace Bushnell*, 203.

contended, his theory of language. Nevertheless, as Michal Kramer has demonstrated, the theory of language was always a central part of his toolkit, especially in matters more social and ecclesial than speculative.²

Whether in reaction to the Unitarian controversies in New England or the infamous extravagances of the 1840 presidential election, Bushnell formulated his ideas of language in reaction to what he perceived as ruptures in the social order. Too often, he believed, people became swept up in the letter of language, both theological and political, leaving behind the spirit. The essays collected in 1849's *God in Christ*, with their explanatory "Preliminary Dissertation on Language," sought to reinterpret critical doctrines of Christianity in such a way that would mutually reflect and reconcile the positions of New England orthodox Congregationalists and the then-ascendant Unitarian movement. By calling for a more intuitive, imaginative, and less dogmatic conversation about doctrine, Bushnell left himself open to the accusing questions of his critics: How then can truth be known from falsehood? How could he call himself orthodox and not Unitarian? Within a year of the book's publication, he was tried and barely escaped charges of heresy from his fellow Congregationalists.

It is my contention here that Bushnell's strongest answer to these important questions rests in his understanding of social order, found throughout his work. Unable to affirm the reliability of either the particular American denominations' doctrinal formulations or the hermeneutical philosophies they rested upon, he placed his confidence in a *social hermeneutic*—or what the man himself would have called an *organic* one. It depends not on a particular

² Mullin, *The Puritan as Yankee*, 6; Kramer, "Horace Bushnell's Philosophy of Language."

doctrine of interpretation, but on the structure of society itself, the dialogical interactions between groups of interpreters, and a faith in providential guidance.

Nostalgia and Conflict

When Bushnell writes about his upbringing in Bantam village of Litchfield, Connecticut, the image he conjures strikes in perfect unison with his theology. “If there was ever a child of Christian nurture,” wrote Cheney, referencing the title of one of her father’s books, “he was one.”³ An 1851 sermon, “The Age of Homespun,” is his often-quoted, nostalgic ode to life in the Connecticut countryside. It conjures the organic unity of a simple people, built on hard work, hardy pleasures, and old time religion:

If we speak of what in the polite world is called society, our homespun age had just none of it; and perhaps the more of society for that reason, because what they had was separate from all the polite fictions and empty conventionalities of the world. ... [The people] are serious and gay by turns; or the young folks go on with some play, while the fathers and mothers are discussing some hard point of theology in the minister’s last sermon; or, perhaps, the great danger coming to sound morals from the multiplication of turnpikes and newspapers!⁴

This intrinsic harmony, however, did not occur in the absence of difference, especially as a theologian would notice it. “The religion of the house,” by his own account, “was composite”⁵—his father was a Methodist and his mother an Episcopalian, whose mother in turn, Bushnell points reveals in his devotional account of her, had her own conversion out from Calvinism.

³ Ibid., 8.

⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, 22-23. Mullin’s biography draws special attention to this sermon as well, using it as a jumping-off point for talking about the “Puritan” in Bushnell.

⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, 28.

When his parents made a home together in deeply Congregationalist Litchfield, though, his parents both joined that church, with no difficulties that he mentions in doing so.

Such denominational difference in Bushnell's own upbringing cannot be read innocently in light of the circumstances, and his attitudes toward them, of his adult career. Though a Congregationalist preacher who considered himself orthodox throughout, he was surrounded by other communities and let himself be influenced by them. During his college years in New Haven and in Hartford also, where he served as minister of North Church for nearly his whole ministry, Episcopalians were his primary interlocutors, and it was toward them that his early polemic was turned. Nevertheless, a reading of *Christian Nurture* betrays a very Episcopalian sensibility of religious stability, against the more Congregationalist preference for the unsteady cycles of revivalism. Even while retaining the doctrine of full church membership through adult conversion, the book tends in all but name for the older world practice that, in Hartford, was represented by the Episcopalians, and which he encountered in his 1845-46 period in Europe:

In Germany, for example, the church includes all the people, and it is remarkable that, under a scheme so loose, and with so much of pernicious error taught in the pulpit, there is yet so much of deep religious feeling, so much of lovely and simply character, and a savor of Christian piety so generally prevalent in the community.⁶

During the travels abroad that preceded that book's publication by only a year, never far from Bushnell's vocal dismay at the Roman Catholic world was a certain admiration for the sensible power of its worship.⁷

While in Europe, he became intensely involved in international ecumenical efforts through the Christian Alliance and especially the Evangelical Alliance. This work, upon

⁶ *Christian Nurture*, 25.

⁷ Mullin, *The Puritan as Yankee*, esp. 83-87.

returning to New England, continued as he turned his attention to Unitarianism with the lectures that would be collected as *God in Christ*. He speaks there of a “unity of the spirit” between Unitarian and orthodox, and even represents their particular accounts of the Atonement as two sides of the same spiritual coin.⁸ Even while denying that he meant to surrender any ground sacred to orthodoxy, he dismayed fellow Congregationalists by suggesting that they might have something to learn from Unitarian thinking—doing so nearly brought his ministry to an end. The stated goal of this ecumenism is a new kind of revival, one coming about organically—“a grand catholic reviving, a universal movement, penetrating gradually and quickening into power the whole church of Christ on earth.”⁹

Over the course of Bushnell’s career, the problem of religious others became ever more pressing, which for him only necessitated the need for solutions. The rise of Unitarianism and its Transcendentalist offshoots in the later Antebellum years was very much in the air, as well as an ongoing Quaker presence. “Metaphysical” religion was close enough (in time, space, and thinking) that its renowned prophet, Andrew Jackson Davis, came forth with an entire book in sympathetic response to Bushnell’s lectures.¹⁰ As a point of agreement in two recent, otherwise divergent histories of American theology, the years leading up to the Civil War were marked by the dissolution of whatever force of orthodox consensus the young nation had achieved among its religious thinkers.¹¹ After Bushnell, and sometimes in reference to him, the Christian

⁸ *God in Christ*, 99, 269.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 354.

¹⁰ Davis, *The Approaching Crisis*. Davis is mainly encouraged by Bushnell’s approach to language and the supernatural, but spurns him for his failure to do away with historical religion entirely.

¹¹ Noll, *America’s God*; Holifield, *Theology in America*.

establishment he knew would begin to split along the spectrum between liberal and fundamentalist factions.

In his time, Bushnell grew weary of the endless debates. The explanation he repeatedly gave for their intransigence was in terms of the theory of language; because words make such an imprecise medium for representing the divine, holding too fervently to them will inevitably lead to confusion. Unlike the professional theologians, who made their livings off of controversy, for the Hartford minister and public intellectual it made things only more complicated and distracted from pastoral concerns. Perhaps not so clearly as in the essay “Christian Comprehensiveness” does he set out his sympathy for this fatigue and his optimism for its resolution:

Many minds have lately been occupied with a peculiar grief on this account. See, they say, into how many sects and schools the body of our Lord is riven! And if we look at the evil passions and bitter strifes involved, it is truly a mournful sight. But controversies must arise; in one view, controversies were needed, else the manifold extremes of truth could never appear.¹²

In a work like *Christian Nurture*, by bringing the issues at stake out from abstract language and into, for instance, the praxis of home life, theological disputes seem to resolve themselves in the service of activity. From the community life in the “age of homespun” to the theological playing field of the New England elite, Bushnell sensed that religious differences, whose disagreements were more linguistic than actual, would easily dissolve when they encounter the actual, material language of practical living.

¹² *Building Eras in Religion*, 457.

Unstable Poetics

By the time *God in Christ* was being prepared for publication in early 1849, the three untraditional discourses on traditional theological subjects that mainly comprise it had already been delivered by Bushnell in person at Cambridge, New Haven, and Andover. They met with vigorous, if mixed, responses. The overwhelming sense at first, actually, was of plain confusion; one commentary on the Andover talk remarked that “the recondite nature of the the themes he discussed, as well as the abstruse method and language ... rendered his discourse intelligible to only a few of his hearers.”¹³ The “Preliminary Dissertation on Language” that Bushnell added to the book was intended to provide a clarifying key, but for many, it was only more unsettling. “If one-tenth part of what Dr. Bushnell has said about the vagueness of language were true,” wrote a reviewer of *God in Christ*, “society would long since have been thrown into inextricable confusion.”¹⁴

It is not hard to see how a reader could be left with this impression. The thrust of the essay is that there are two “departments” in language: the literal, statements referring to physical things, and the figurative, which refers to thought or spirit through analogy to the literal. In consequence, the second department, which theology falls under, can be no better than inexact. Bringing to bear what he takes to be the most recent scientific thinking on the nature of language, Bushnell reveals theology to be unable to produce final pronouncements about the supernatural.

¹³ Editorial from the *New York Evangelist*, quoted in Mullin, *The Puritan as Yankee*, 141.

¹⁴ No source cited, quoted in *ibid.*, 155.

The ideas presented in the “Dissertation” may in fact be more intuitive for the modern reader than for Bushnell’s contemporaries. Its sense of inexact, arbitrary signs seems to foreshadow the endless webs of signifiers described by 20th century theorists, and the account of “an instinct of language” embedded in human nature that calls to mind the assumptions of Chomskyan linguistics. (Bushnell, *God in Christ*, 13, 17. For a somewhat parallel Chomskyan presentation, see Stephen Pinker’s *The Language Instinct*.)

“Our theologies and opinions,” he concludes, “have no more of authority, and are no more entitled to a Christian standing than our speculations in geology.”¹⁵ Linguistic science brings theology down among the ever-imperfect natural sciences. Here Bushnell finds his key to the problem of disagreement: it is because of “a perfectly unsuspecting confidence” in spiritual language that we are beset with, “in great part, the distractions, the infinite multiplications of opinion, the errors and sects and strifes of the Christian world.”¹⁶

Much of the “Dissertation” maintains an optimistic attitude about what can be done with spiritual language despite its limitations. A thick mysticism permeates the essay, which draws to mind Emerson’s rhapsodies on language in *Nature*: “the outer world is seen to be a vast menstruum of thought or intelligence. There is a logos in the forms of things, by which they are prepared to serve as types or images for what is inmost in our souls.”¹⁷ As part of this metaphysical process, coming to grasp spiritual facts is not a matter of factual understanding (by a “male spinster of logic”¹⁸) so much as poetic reasoning. Contradiction must be embraced and ambiguity inhabited. Here Bushnell betrays the profound influence of Coleridge.¹⁹ The scriptures

¹⁵ *God in Christ*, 310.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁹ See esp. Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, 206, “On the Difference in Kind of the Reason and the Understanding.” Around the same time as Coleridge, Hegel was drawing it out from Kant and making it his own with a great deal of enthusiasm. Understanding signifies the mathematical and deductive process, insisting on the law of non-contradiction. Coleridge associates it with sense experience. Reason emphasizes the co-implication of opposites and their synthetic unity. Coleridge associates reason with the Spirit. *Aids to Reflection* was clearly on Bushnell’s mind during this period in the late 1840s, and in one conversation he suggested to a friend that the world’s embrace of his ideas might need to come about as gradually and unsuspectingly as his own embrace of Coleridge (Cheney, *Life and Letters of Horace Bushnell*, 208).

Bushnell’s general notion of claiming language as the center of his thinking resonates deeply with *Aids to Reflection*. The first stated goal of the book (“in the order of their comparative importance”) is “to direct the Reader’s attention to the value of the Science of Words, their use and abuse and the incalculable advantages attached to the habit of using them appropriately, and with a distinct knowledge of their primary, derivative, and metaphorical senses” (xi).

will be read (and more fervently than they are already), he imagines, “as inspirations and poetic forms of life; requiring, also, divine inbreathings and exaltations in us, that we may ascend into their meaning.”²⁰ The poetic turn, then, will bring theologians down from the speculative clouds that they might help people obtain “the more cultivated and nicer apprehension of symbol,” and indeed, “drawing them as much closer to the practical life of religion.”²¹ To this extent, he seems to have practiced his preaching; such “aesthetic engagement”²² with the text was very much his method of biblical hermeneutics in sermons and essays. Key to any such engagement, finally, is the recognition that language is a product of social processes. Words gain their meaning by use, and whenever they are used, they “carry their origin in their face.”²³ Interpreting language, therefore, entails a dance with the history of usage and a dependence on it. So far as language can be used meaningfully, we have each other to thank for it.

Most of Bushnell’s most vocal reviewers, however, did not share his optimism. Theologians from all the major New England seminaries responded against the attack on theology built into his theory of language and its elaboration throughout *God in Christ*. In the heresy trial following the book’s publication, the Congregationalist Hartford Central association judged that many of these ideas, “if followed out to their legitimate results would ... lead to fundamental error”²⁴; he escaped guilt probably only because he was so personally well-liked by his peers. Such a reaction against Bushnell’s theory of religious language resonates with much

²⁰ *God in Christ*, 93.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

²² In the words of Duke, *Horace Bushnell*, 10. This is a study of Bushnell from the perspective of biblical interpretation. Interestingly, Duke points out that, despite all that liberal Protestant theology took from Bushnell, it did not take his hermeneutics.

²³ *God in Christ*, 24.

²⁴ Quoted in Mullin, *The Puritan as Yankee*, 164-165.

broader patterns in the encounter of Christianity, and biblical literature in particular, with Western modernity. In his famous analysis of the “tyrannical” claim to truth implicit in the nature of the Bible’s language, Erich Auerbach points to its inner need for a literal hermeneutic at the cost of collapse. When literalism becomes impossible, “the method of interpretation is scorned and rejected, the Biblical stories become ancient legends, and the doctrine they had contained, now dis severed from them, becomes a disembodied image.”²⁵ Louis Dupré offers a similar narrative in his account of the breakdown of the premodern world at the hands of nominalist theories of signification. Paraphrasing Derrida he writes, “Only when spoken words partake in that divine Word through which the Creator secures the essential intelligibility of his creation can we safely presume that they intrinsically correspond to the very nature of the real.”²⁶ So also the reverse is true; when Bushnell disturbed the correspondence between words and reality, the divine Word began to appear inaccessible to his contemporaries. Dupré’s account, however, also parallels Bushnell’s sense of optimism for the liberation of signification: “By detaching words from things it provided an indispensable condition, albeit a negative one, for language to develop freely beyond its function of naming the real.”²⁷ Language, by recognizing the limits of representation, can be rightfully returned to the poetic imagination from which it came.

The “Dissertation” represents Bushnell’s most sustained and well-known thinking on language, yet it far from encompasses the extent of his thinking on the subject, which spans his whole corpus. Expanding beyond that work, answers to the pressing questions of truth in interpretation that it poses begin to appear, especially through treatments of social order. His

²⁵ *Mimesis*, 16.

²⁶ *Passage to Modernity*, 104.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 105.

speech, “Revelation,”²⁸ given in 1839, represents an early glimpse of this eminently social model of human and divine communication. Every act of transmission, whether among people or between people and God, occurs through the mediation of perception, language, and history. In principle, the means of learning about God is the same as how we learn about each other, not other than “in and through the communicative process itself.”²⁹ Since people tend not to form abstract theories about one another in lieu of simply communicating, abstract theological speculation should not take the place of simply contemplating and living in conversation with the self-revelation of God. Religious interpretation, therefore, is a fundamentally social act.

In his analysis of Bushnell’s linguistics “as a mode of cultural criticism,” Michael Kramer highlights the thoughts on language expressed primarily in the 1846 sermon *Unconscious Influence*. This offers yet another dimension to the picture proposed in the “Preliminary Dissertation.” Once again there are two levels, “two sorts of influence belonging to man; that which is active or voluntary, and that which is unconscious.”³⁰ The first, that is, stands for verbal persuasion, for what is literally said. The second is more mysterious, flowing “directly from our character and conduct” and pervading human communities.³¹ Kramer insists that the urgency beneath this theory, as with the others, is social before it is theoretical, and it comes in direct reaction to Bushnell’s perception of the decline of character and religion in American political life, marked especially by the “new spectacle” of the 1840 election.³² The point is that we affect

²⁸ Unfortunately this essay is currently not accessible to me, and I rely on the account of it given in Duke, “Horace Bushnell,” 18-21. The text itself is only available, according to Duke, in MS at Yale Divinity School’s Library and transcribed in an unpublished 1966 Yale PhD dissertation.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁰ *Unconscious Influence*, 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

³² “Horace Bushnell’s Philosophy of Language,” 574.

each other through subtle character in all our encounters far over and above the mere words we say. To attend only to the words of dogmas, therefore, or to political rhetoric, only partially captures the whole communication, the whole revelation. As a result, people are as responsible for the subtle expression of their character as for their words.

So far as these approaches to language are concerned with language as a socially-embedded thing from beginning to end, they are fully consistent with the “Preliminary Dissertation.” Importantly, they shed special light on the “Dissertation”’s contention that the meanings of words spring wholly from their use. Not only does social use inform language, but language is actually a subset of social communication and common life, which are the media of revelation and, consequently, the first grounds by which any linguistic message can begin to be understood.

Organismic Order

The account of child-rearing that Bushnell offers in *Christian Nurture* is explicitly divided in two parts: first a kind of natural theology on “the human side,” and second, an exegetical discussion on the ways in which “God has justified, on his part, the doctrine we maintain.”³³ A similar division occurs more implicitly in *God in Christ*, where the scientific argument about the nature of language runs in parallel with a reading of biblical texts. In each case, the exegesis is decisively informed by its natural conditions. Just as interpreting the Bible’s teaching about raising children must begin by a grasp of how families actually function, the Atonement and the

³³ *Christian Nurture*, 14.

divinity of Christ can only be understood by first recognizing that they are framed in language. Once the basics are understood, the religious dimension falls naturally into place.

The central metaphor for Bushnell’s concept of the family, and of communities more generally, is the organism. “All society is organic,” he writes, “the church, the state, the school, the family.”³⁴ In many respects, this claim connects with a larger polemic against crass individualism, for “a pure, separate, individual man, living *wholly* within, and from himself, is a mere fiction.” Individuals, rather, live in ongoing mediation with the organic communities, even while not losing their particular distinction. The idyllic images he frequently returns to of family and town functioning in perfect harmony emphasize the separate roles of the men, women, children, and the rest, each up to their own tasks, yet “sanctified by a common grace.” It is through these processes and these exchanges that the interpretive process occurs.

Conrad Cherry’s essay on the “structure of organic thinking” in Bushnell highlights three characteristics of the “organic model”: functional wholeness, temporality (or teleology), and the limitation of human understanding.³⁵ These elements reveal key features of the organic structure of the family as described in *Christian Nurture*, and can be applied to how Bushnell viewed different Christian churches, whose disagreements were such a concern throughout his career.

	functional wholeness	temporality/teleology	human limitation
family	“acting thus together, they take a common character ... and ought, I believe, to be sanctified by a common grace” (<i>Christian Nurture</i> , 90)	toward the goal of Christian nurture	“there is nothing in this view which conflicts with the proper individuality of persons and their separate responsibility” (<i>Christian Nurture</i> , 94)

³⁴ Ibid., 31.

³⁵ “The Structure of Organic Thinking,” 4.

	functional wholeness	temporality/teleology	human limitation
churches	the interpretations of the different churches together combine to form a truer whole	toward “a great catholic revival, a universal movement” (<i>God in Christ</i> , 354)	individuals may see only one side of the fuller truth

In these groupings, his answer to the problem of interpretive truth begins to come into clarity. The problem itself, it seems, is grounded only in the fact of human limitation, and its solution arises through the working of a collective organism, which hopefully comes to perfection over the course of time.

This perfecting process, however, is not solely a natural one. Providential guidance participates in these organisms, both on the human level and at the level of the organism as such. The order and authority in the family, Bushnell insists, are ordained by God. The full conversion of a child, also, does not come about solely by the earthly means of the parents, but requires election and grace as well. Society as a whole functions under a similar sovereignty, including the political and religious realms. Human government generally can claim “a legitimate and proper right of government only when it is a factor, so to speak, in the Divine Government itself.”³⁶ It is for this reason that the problem of interpretation can transcend its own limits. So far as the interpretation of doctrine participates in the organic process, it participates in, and can trust in, providential guidance. This in turn will make itself manifest at the level of individuals through their participation in the organism. In an organismic order, through the subtle language of interaction that goes on in words, beneath them in human character, and wound up in a

³⁶ “Popular Government by Divine Right,” *Building Eras in Religion*, 290.

divinely-guided poetics, something spiritually true can be arrived at despite the appearance of deep difference, the instability of words, and the vagaries of people.

Such guidance, however, does not come automatically. The critical characteristic of the organism, which could even be added to Cherry's list above, is *order*. "We speak of an ungoverned family," he warns, "as the synonym of a disorderly, wretched, and dishonored, if not ruined, family."³⁷ Though Bushnell's sense for mystical poetics bears some resemblance to his contemporaries the Transcendentalists, he recoiled at their characteristic individualism, which might tend toward disorder. His are poetics amidst order, not against it. In contrast to the Transcendentalists' embrace of the wild frontier, the trip Bushnell took to California for health reasons in 1856-57 starkly reveals both his crusade against Americans' individualist tendencies and his revulsion to a world without order. Inspired by the state's natural beauty, he was appalled by the devastation that a few years of uncontrolled mining and logging had been able to accomplish. Even more, he was troubled by the communities he found among the settlers. "It would be no surprise to me," he wrote, "to hear, almost any day, that fire and murder were loose in San Francisco, rank as in the days of Robespierre."³⁸ During the visit, he preached the gospel of organic order in "Society and Religion: A Sermon for California," which called for new social and religious institutions to be established in the young state. It inspired so much enthusiasm among local Congregationalist leaders that they offered Bushnell the first presidency of the new College of California. Though tempted, he turned the offer down and returned to Hartford.

While so many of his readers saw a dangerous threat to established religion in Bushnell's theory of language, understood it as a truer guide for social and religious order. Through the

³⁷ *Christian Nurture*, 315.

³⁸ No source cited, quoted in Mullin, *The Puritan as Yankee*, 185.

processes of organismic wholes, groups and individuals can find means to transcend their interpretive, linguistic limits and participate in a overarching apprehension of what is true.

The Need for Each Other

The limits placed on spiritual description by the theory of language in the “Preliminary Dissertation” bears most vitally for Bushnell on the doctrines professed by different Christian churches. All who reach at Christ, he supposes, grasp some dimension of Christian truth. In Christ, they share a spiritual unity that manifests as an organic order. For that reason, the members of this organic whole—the various sects and their believers—cannot accomplish a full and satisfying interpretation of truth without sharing, comparing, and combining their particular interpretations. That is to say: they need each other.

Probably in no place is Bushnell’s sense of ecumenism as an engine of Christian truth more apparent than in the 1848 essay “Christian Comprehensiveness.” First published in that same critical year for Bushnell in which he wrote and delivered the *God in Christ* lectures, the social and ecclesial vision of the essay deeply enriches the doctrinal imagination of the lectures. This critical connection has been overlooked. Here, Bushnell both laments and praises the state of the Christian churches in America, to the point that “the present distribution of the church, abating what is due to causes that are criminal, makes it more completely one.”³⁹ This “distribution,” he contends, is not the same as a disastrous “schism,” and through the opinions the different communities develop, the organic whole of them ultimately benefits. For “controversies must needs arise,” he continues, “else the manifold extremes of truth could never

³⁹ *Building Eras in Religion*, 387.

appear.”⁴⁰ To that end, the essay includes elaborate discussions of different Christian groups, from Baptists to Roman Catholics, attempting to extract the latent and unique aspects of truth borne by each. That is not to say that all sects, or any sect, can be perfect, since their view is incomplete, and “To see anything partially, or at one pole, is to see it insufficiently, thus in defective forms and proportions.”⁴¹ Still, he was insistent on gesturing toward what can be learned from others. This kind of perception and capacity for appreciation was one of Bushnell’s great talents throughout his career, whether it meant engaging the Anglicans and Catholics of Europe, the Episcopalians of Boston, the Baptists of Rhode Island, or the Unitarians of Boston. In “Christian Comprehensiveness,” he takes this talent to the level of a theological method taken on by one momentarily “holding himself aloof from the controversy, and looking calmly on as a spectator to ask, what do these combatants mean? what great truth have they each in mind for which they are doing battle?”⁴² This method ultimately excels all more insular ones, he is sure to point out, because it recognizes the limits of signification and the social grounding of the language in which spiritual concepts are contained.

The position that *God in Christ* takes toward the Unitarians, particularly in the discussion of the Atonement, seems contradictory, and some orthodox readers took it to be heretical. They had a hard enough time being told that they should find recognize the truth in the Unitarians’ “subjective” view about the moral meaning of Christ’s sacrifice. More perplexing, however, was Bushnell’s insistence throughout that he is “in no mood of surrender to Unitarianism.”⁴³ In the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 457.

⁴¹ Ibid., 411.

⁴² Ibid., 418.

⁴³ *God in Christ*, 101.

book as in the controversy that followed, he insists that he never swayed from orthodoxy, despite the appearance to many contemporaries that this is just what he had done. Understanding the logic of Bushnell's organic plurality requires some explication of this issue.

As a limited individual, working within limited groups, a person has a necessary place and a role to play within the organic whole. The effect of the radical doctrine of *God in Christ*, for instance, was not meant to be an utter transformation of Christian preaching and teaching. Its stated aim is more subtle, to "add greatly to the comfort and true self-understanding of the preacher in his work, if he has, in his own mind, some such solution as this."⁴⁴ For the moment, at least, it is precisely through the fact of differences, working in practical unity and freedom, that the elements of a later reconciliation are built. Until then, some idea of the comprehensive truth that is distributed out among the different sects is the reserve of the reflective Christian, as a matter of *personal* growth. "When a man is able to comprehend the reality of all sects, casting away the unreality," Bushnell concludes, "he will be a full-grown proper Christian man."⁴⁵ The churches can aid in this, not by "hold[ing] opinions more loosely" or "be[ing] patient with error,"⁴⁶ but by fostering a mood of ecumenism and dialog that seeks "to beget a more fraternal feeling and soften the asperities and prejudices that hold us asunder."⁴⁷ This is little different from the organic unity-through-difference that is so apparent in the life of a healthy family. For

⁴⁴ Ibid., 271.

⁴⁵ "Christian Comprehensiveness," *Building Eras in Religion*, 424.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 457-458.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 447.

“there is nothing” in the fact of the family’s common character and identity “which conflicts with the proper individuality of persons and their separate responsibility.”⁴⁸

For the moment, such cautious ecumenism seems to suffice. But that is not to say that something grander isn’t at work. Both *God in Christ* and “Christian Comprehensiveness” confidently point toward a time of ultimate synthesis when, just as the sects now meet spiritually “in Gethsemane, or on the hill of Calvary, there to kneel and weep away our sins together,”⁴⁹ they shall also meet in this world as well. Indeed, “we may well desire a riper state, in which the Christian body shall coalesce more perfectly and draw itself towards a more comprehensive and catholic polity.”⁵⁰ This rhetoric, furthermore, is little different from the “out-populating power of the Christian stock” spoken of in *Christian Nurture*. Throughout his work there is a millenarian sensibility that a major change is soon to come, and when it does Bushnell assumes that his controversial ideas will be vindicated. So he entrusts them “to time, as the body of Christ was left, believing that after three days they will rise again.”⁵¹ The picture of what is to come does not seem to be any political unity of churches, but a spiritual one, a sensibility of mutual recognition in and through ongoing dialectic.⁵²

⁴⁸ *Christian Nurture*, 94. If I quote excessively in the following passages, it is because on this topic the flourish of Bushnell’s language is undoubtedly at its height.

⁴⁹ *God in Christ*, 356.

⁵⁰ “Christian Comprehensiveness,” *Building Eras in Religion*, 388.

⁵¹ *God in Christ*, 116.

⁵² If by using “dialectic” I draw reference to Hegel, it is no accident; there are deep resonances. In “Christian Comprehensiveness,” Bushnell picks up a very Hegelian dialectic from “the distinguished French philosopher M. Cousin” (Victor Cousin, 1792-1867) of ideal, empiric, and eclectic moments, which he applies to the history of Christian sects as the early church, the divisions of sects, and the coming co-recognition. Understanding his own place in history, too, Bushnell bears similarity to Hegel, for both saw themselves rather like conduits through whom the inevitable historical processes were flowing. His ideas “are not,” Bushnell writes in *God in Christ*, “my choice, or invention, so much as a necessary growth, whose process I can hardly trace myself” (98).

To Bushnell's mind, this moment to come is bound up distinctly with the destiny and experiment of the nation. Because of the uniquely American developments of religious freedom and individual liberty within national unity, this country has witnessed such breadth of religious interpretation as none other has seen before. As a result, "probably never until now has the world been ready to conceive the true idea of a comprehensive Christianity."⁵³ "Why else" he asks, "are we thrown together in this manner, Christians of all names and sects, living in the same neighborhoods, fellow-citizens under the same laws, holding equal terms before the laws, united in business, intermarried in families?"⁵⁴ These circumstances are given by God in order to begin what will eventually be a universal process. For indeed, "the extension of liberty must bring the same results to pass everywhere." Once completed, the new Christian order comes complete with an interpretation of the Establishment Clause:

the civil power will not intermeddle, save as it offers a friendly protection to the church, repaid by its sanctifying presence and the union it consecrates between the public life of the nation and God. Enough that the church, in all lands and under whatever diversities, will know itself as one, in common works, a common faith, and an accordant worship,—the body of Christ on earth, the fullness of him that filleth all in all.⁵⁵

Just as a federal government can unite disparate regions, states, and cultures, Bushnell's Christ can serve as an effectual, real sign of unity for the different churches. With their differences retained, they participate in an organic unity, guided toward truth by the truth of their common aspiration in Christ. This resemblance to the federal political order suggests a powerful faith in the capacity of the American state, like the Christian churches, to function as a divinely-guided

⁵³ "Christian Comprehensiveness," *Building Eras in Religion*, 388.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 425.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 444.

organic whole, achieving such truth in unity as its parts could not possibly have achieved on their own.

It may be suggested, perhaps, that this optimism for a coming unity could only have come from a writer before the Civil War, when the federal bond broke down and sent religious communities into corresponding disarray. Despite his highly controversial claims, the actual modesty of Bushnell's proposals combined with his perennial nostalgia for an organic past might suggest that he could only think the way he did in rather placid times, and that an upset like war might do away with those ideas easily. It is on similar grounds, writing after the fall of Nazism, that Karl Barth could call Ludwig Feuerbach a "non-knower of death" and a "misknower of evil" for daring to claim that the good of God might actually be the good of people.⁵⁶ But Bushnell had his own answer to the war. In an 1864 sermon, as the fighting raged on, he was capable of once again "holding himself aloof from the controversy," as if it were just another theological squabble, and seeing in it the working-out of providential forces. "Oh! it is religion, it is God!" he exclaims. "Every drum-beat is a hymn, the cannon thunder God, the electric silence, darting victory along the wires, is the inaudible greeting of God's favoring word and purpose."⁵⁷ For him, at least, the war was not a refutation of organic unity but the processes of its maturation. Chaos serves as the occasion for divine purposes, ever working in and through both conflict and difference. Wisdom means playing one's part, defending one's difference, while still looking for and pointing toward what in self and others constitutes part of the organic whole of truth.

⁵⁶ "An Introductory Essay" in Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, xxviii. With these remarks, Barth is actually quoting Hans Ehrenberg's *Die Philosophie der Zukunft*.

⁵⁷ "Popular Government by Divine Right," *Building Eras in Religion*, 316.

Conclusion: Legacy and Modernity

The narrative I have attempted to stitch together describes how Horace Bushnell's sense of himself as the unified product of a "composite" household and a federal nation might have been transferred to an optimistic sense of unity-in-difference among the competing doctrines of Christian sects. When he speaks of his childhood—"the age of homespun"—the coordination that pragmatic industry demands prevails over the petty disagreements that an over-attention to philosophical language gives rise to.⁵⁸ If only the churches could function similarly, recognizing the need of each for the others rather than dwelling on their dogmatic differences, they could form an interpretive order through which discerning believers might arrive at a fuller grasp of Christian truth. The fact is, of course, that the United States has become only more diverse since Bushnell, and from it many more syntheses have come out of difference. For that reason, it is worth remarking just a little bit on how common his experience might be and some of what has followed in his wake.

Though rather far from Bushnell in some respects, William James's writing on religion half a century later bears some remarkable resemblance on the question of religious diversity. For both (James even more than Bushnell), theological doctrines are approximations and outgrowths from more fundamental experience. What Bushnell said for the incompleteness of language, James said for the incompleteness of consciousness, for "we must frankly recognize the fact that we live in partial systems."⁵⁹ Because different people experience different

⁵⁸ It is surprising, on this point, that Bushnell is not mentioned in Jeffrey Stout's important book *Democracy and Tradition*, which describes a highly resonant picture of organic, pragmatic unity in American theological-political culture amidst ongoing difference.

⁵⁹ *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 376-379. See also, by William James, *The Pluralistic Universe* and *The Meaning of Truth*.

conditions of mental life, “no two of us have identical difficulties, nor should we be expected to work out identical solutions.” Though science can be a means of cataloging the different religious solutions people develop, the science of religion itself cannot be a solution because it is alien to “the personal point of view.” Here we see a similar tension to Bushnell’s necessary membership in a particular sect while contemplating the general unity of them all. As a solution to this, James gestures at the very end of the *Varieties* toward what he calls “the pluralistic hypothesis” for spiritual truths, a dialog among experiences much akin to Bushnell’s, except that James would surely look beyond just the Christian churches.

It is possible, also, to find elements of Bushnell’s thinking and assumptions in two observations that the sociologist Robert Bellah has made of American popular religiosity in the 20th century. The first is the civil religion hypothesis, which Bellah first proposed in 1967 and continued to develop on through his career.⁶⁰ When God is spoken of as the providential guide of the American nation, especially in the utterances of presidents, examination suggests that it is neither the God of Christians, Jews, or any group in particular. Still, when people from these groups do here such, rhetoric, all are able, more or less, to identify this God with their own. The God of civil religion, therefore, represents some pragmatic manifestation of organic unity amidst difference, a unity which by no means collapses difference, but offers it common substance in which to subsist. Bushnell would certainly not identify to God of civil religion as an ultimate truth, but he would welcome the assumption that disparate groups can identify with the same God, who guides the churches and the nation. A second catchword associated with Bellah is “Sheilaism,” which first appeared in 1985’s *Habits of the Heart*. Sheila is the name given to an

⁶⁰ Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”

anonymous woman, a nurse, who informally claims to practice her own religion called Sheilaism, founded on her “own little voice” that distills what she takes to be the most basic religious truths: love herself, take care of each other.⁶¹ Sheilaism has been taken by many authors as emblematic of a particular picking-and-choosing attitude common in American religiosity. Though the public Bushnell, as leader of a Christian congregation, could never be considered quite a Sheilaist (or a Bushnellist), Sheila’s private quest seems to resonate with the sort of personal reflection on religious doctrines that he deems necessary for one to become “a full-grown proper Christian man.”⁶²

None of this is meant to make a claim about Bushnell’s actual influence so much as simply to say that some of the ideas of his that caused such a stir in his day seem to have entered the conventional wisdom of our own. Each of these examples also differs Bushnell’s thinking in important ways, but I mean to suggest that overall they share with him an aesthetic and a heritage. The vision of a pragmatic organic unity amidst visible difference, as well as of how a person might pick and choose through the differences to arrive at a private synthesis, find in Bushnell an artful and early expositor.

⁶¹ Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 221.

⁶² See above, in the previous section.

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