

SHAILER MATHEWS

Life and Significance

Underlying every theological work Shailer Mathews published over the course of his long and productive career is the question of how the Christian church is to deal with the phenomenon of social change. Mathews was concerned with this issue both at the practical level of church involvement in social reform, and at the academic level of theological reflection on the implications of such change for Christian doctrine. Indeed, the two concerns so intertwine in his thought that one has great difficulty distinguishing them from each other: since his understanding of the role of the church was strongly tinged with missionary assumptions, Mathews found it impossible to conceive of academic theological reflection as something that ought to occur in isolation from the church's involvement in social reform. And as a scholar, Mathews was also keenly aware of the need for theologians involved in the social gospel movement to correct the anti-intellectual and merely activist stance taken by some Christian social reformers. In his view, the history of Christian thought is full of instructive examples of how social change and Christian belief interact to the mutual benefit of one another, to produce both desirable social reform and the development of new expressions of traditional Christian doctrines.

The accent on social change in Mathews's thought and in that of other social gospellers who began their careers at the end of the

nineteenth century reflects their own historical experience, which was one of coming to maturity in a period of explosive social and technological change in the Western world. When Mathews was born on 26 May 1863, most North Americans lighted their dwellings with tallow candles or kerosene lamps and used horse-drawn conveyances as their ordinary means of transport. At his death on 23 October 1941, widespread electrification, the automobile, the airplane, and the mechanization of agriculture (to isolate four among many important technological developments of the period) had so altered the life of most North Americans that the America of Mathews's youth seems more akin to that of the founding fathers and mothers than that of the mid-twentieth century.

One measure of the distance between the worlds of Mathews's birth and death is less benign than the replacement of kerosene lamps by electric lights. Mathews was born during one of the first of modern wars, a war that, despite the carnage it entailed, was fought with saber, rifle, and cannon. Had he lived less than four years longer, he would have known of the deployment of a weapon that, for all practical purposes, relegates the technology of the Civil War to the military museum and, as the Roman Catholic bishops of the United States noted a decade ago, calls for theological reflection about the morality of war that must move at a sharp disjuncture from all previous moral teaching about war and peace.¹

From the "one-hoss shay" to the airplane, from the Winchester repeater to the atomic bomb, Mathews lived through a period of rapid technological development perhaps unprecedented in human history. Technological change inevitably implies and entails social change. During Mathews's lifetime, the fabric of North American society was subject to a series of rewavings with imports as far-reaching as those of the technological restructuring of North American life during the same period. Mathews's distinctive contribution to modern North American theology, the theology of social process, addresses the period of rapid social transition through which he lived. The notion of social process forms the framework of all Mathews's theological work: the term implies that interchange of mutual effect between church and society which is, for Mathews, the matrix within which Christian theological reflection must always take shape. The unifying theme of Mathews's theological writings is his constant desire to understand and articulate the reciprocal relationship of church and society in a period of social flux.

MATHEWS'S EARLY YEARS

The preceding interpretation of Mathews's theological significance is one he himself proposed. His 1936 autobiography, *New Faith for Old (NFO)*, is an *apologia pro vita sua* justifying Mathews's involvement in the theological controversies that troubled North American Protestantism in the post-World War I period. *NFO* presents Mathews's life as a parable of shifting Christian response to the social developments that had occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the mid-Victorian evangelicalism that sufficed for his boyhood in a town in a nonindustrial area of New England could no longer meet his mature religious needs in the complex society of modern, urban, industrial America. New faith must supplant old.²

Mathews was born in Portland, Maine, at a time when that small city remained a solidly Yankee stronghold, a community hardly touched either by industrialization or the influx of immigrants having other than Anglo Protestant ancestry who had begun to alter the character of other New England cities such as Boston. Mathews's own lineage was in all respects Yankee; both his maternal and paternal forebears were seventeenth-century British settlers of New England.³ Through his mother, Sophia Lucinda Shailer, he was the descendant of several generations of teachers and ministers.⁴ Mathews's maternal grandfather, Dr. William H. Shailer, was a Baptist minister and man of influence in Portland.⁵ In *NFO*, Mathews recalls (with a mixture of wry amusement and slight condescension characteristic of his recollections about his upbringing) the traditional New England sabbath Dr. Shailer kept:

With him Sunday was still the Puritan Sabbath. During its hours no cooking was to be done except boiling water for his tea. The family always had cold corned beef which had been cooked on Saturday, which was uniformly treated in New England as a "baking day." How strict was his Sabbatarianism may be observed from a curious regulation of the house. The piano had a melodeon attachment which, by turning a switch, could be played with the piano keys. On Sunday only the melodeon part of the instrument could be played.⁶

As the passage suggests, in his autobiography Mathews views his formative years as typical of those who came of age in middle-class households in the mid-Victorian evangelical culture of the north-eastern United States.⁷ Though New England evangelicalism had strong Puritan overtones, by Mathews's youth revivalism and romanticism had effected significant changes in its character. Stressing the primacy of the affective dimension of religious experience, both allowed religious feeling a prominence that tended to mitigate the sterner implications of rigorously held Calvinist theology. To illustrate what the shift from orthodox Calvinism to Victorian evangelicalism entailed in New England families such as his, in *NFO* Mathews notes that his father endured a religious crisis regarding the punitive justice of God: as a Baptist deacon, Jonathan Mathews felt obliged to hold the orthodox position that love and justice have equal weight, as God decides the fate of sinners; but his consideration of the matter gradually led him to conclude that God's love always outweighs God's justice. When Jonathan Mathews had reached this decision, he "was rather terrified lest his conviction that God was swayed by love rather than by justice was heretical."⁸

Mathews's formative years were spent in a social milieu in which gradual change was occurring not only in small-town New England's religious beliefs, but also in its economic structures. During his adolescence, Mathews worked as a bookkeeper for his father's wholesale tea and flour business in Portland.⁹ This experience introduced him to what was to be a lifelong concern of both his social gospel theology and activism, the problem of justice in the workplace. Critics of Mathews's political views have sometimes charged him with adopting an unreflective pro-capitalist stance regarding labor-capital disputes.¹⁰ The charge has some merit: a lifelong (and a politically active) Republican, Mathews tended to view organized labor's appeal for substantive change in the economic sector as threatening to social stability. This view certainly reflects the reformist (as opposed to radical) sociological presuppositions he was to derive from his association with Albion Small. But it also stems from his upbringing. Though *NFO* depicts the commercial life of Portland during Mathews's boyhood as relatively uncomplicated in comparison with that of the twentieth century, and though it notes that the structure of New England economic life in the latter half of the nineteenth century did not differ radically from that of the early 1800s, it observes that businessmen such as Jonathan Mathews feared the increasing activity of organized labor, strikes, and riots, and resisted government "interference" in the economic sector, favoring the *laissez-faire* economics of John Stuart Mill.¹¹ Something of this social

and economic conservatism was to tinge Mathews's own thought about economic issues throughout his career.

Mathews's adolescent experience of the practical problems inherent in the complex changes to which North American economic life was being subjected appears to have influenced him to such an extent that he chose as the topic of his high school graduation address in 1880 the theme "Mechanical Industry." In 1936 he recalled that the address opened with the following declamatory flourish: "In these days of strikes and riots our minds naturally turn to that branch of industry in which they occur."¹² As a social gospel theologian who would write frequently on the theme of labor-capital relationships, Mathews recognized the need to transcend his tendency to uncritical identification with the interests of management over against those of labor, and to reframe his understanding of this question. In this respect, Mathews's intellectual development closely parallels that of his mentor Small, who, despite his penchant for progressivist reformism, also expressed severe criticisms of capitalism that often echo Marx.¹³ Both Mathews and Small appear to have been critically aware of how significantly their formative experiences and class background tinged their mature theology, though neither was perhaps ever entirely successful in overcoming these formative influences on his thought.

In conclusion, Shailer Mathews's coming of age took place in a rather conventionally pious middle-class New England evangelical home. Even when one allows for that golden patina that memory often casts on elderly people's recollections of their childhood, one cannot read Mathews's account of his childhood without imagining Norman Rockwell or Winslow Homer scenes of straw-hatted, freckle-faced children with dogs and fishing poles. The Chicago in which Mathews was to spend his mature years was more than geographically distant from his New England home; in the first half of the twentieth century, the burgeoning Midwestern urban center was a microcosm of the pluralistic, bustling society of an urban twentieth-century North America, an America Mathews and other social gospellers liked to call "America in the making." In appealing for Christian reformist response to this new society, Mathews sometimes exhibits a certain visceral nativism.¹⁴ But as with his economic views in general, as a social gospeller Mathews also demonstrates a critical awareness of his tendency to see North America as the community of the New England saints writ large—as in the gently mocking observation with which he sums up his upbringing in the autobiographical essay "Theology as Group Belief": "We had no serious anxieties about the social order. Indeed I do not remem-

ber that we knew there was a social order. We knew God had been good to New England." ¹⁵

THE EDUCATIONAL YEARS

In 1880 Mathews entered Colby College, some eighty miles from his home. Viewing his educational years with the same optic of wry amusement he had employed in remembering his boyhood, he characterizes his Colby education as one that reinforced, and did not cause him to question, the provincialism of his upbringing. ¹⁶ During his years at Colby, most of the college's students were drawn from the region surrounding the college, and were from backgrounds similar to that of Mathews. As was the case with most North American colleges at the time, the curriculum was calculated to uphold the traditional cultural values that such students' rearing presupposed. In two respects, however, Mathews's college work evidently challenged him to begin the process of thinking critically about his cultural heritage in ways that were to determine the course of his academic career. The first of these stimuli came from a charismatic professor of history and political economy, Albion W. Small, who was eventually to become president of the college. Small owed his *entrée* to the profession to Mathews's grandfather, Dr. Shailer, who (despite misgivings) had recommended him for his first teaching post in Portland. ¹⁷ Mathews's recollection of Small's classes indicates that he was a dynamic teacher whose pedagogical methods diverged from the rote memorization employed in most schools at this period. ¹⁸

Small was a founding figure of North American sociology. In Berlin and Leipzig, he had studied under such notable social scientists as Gustav Schmoller and Adolf Wagner, members of the German historical school of economic thinking. The fundamental insight of historical economics—that economic organization is a social construct, rather than a function of rigid natural laws capable of scientific formulation and manipulation—informed Small's progressivist understanding of social change, a notion that had seminal influence on Mathews's thought. ¹⁹ From Small, Mathews derived a sociological perspective and a theoretical framework for understanding social change that were to exercise a continuous architectonic influence in his theological work. Small's 1892 appointment to the chair of sociology at the new University of Chicago, from which he worked to establish this academic discipline in America, insured that his impact on Mathews was to outlast the Colby years. ²⁰

Another initiatory experience of Mathews's college years occurred in connection with his study of the natural sciences. In *NFO* Mathews recalls that in a biology class at Colby, he committed Huxley's *Physiology* to memory. As he undertook this mammoth task, he asked his biology teacher, William Elder, to recommend a book that would demonstrate the errors of the theory of evolution. In recounting Elder's response some fifty years later, Mathews once again paints that portrait of callow naiveté shattered that appears again and again in his recollections of his youth:

"Why do you want to know it is untrue?" he asked. "Because," I replied, with the assurance of complete ignorance, "it is contrary to Christianity." "If science shows," said the professor, "a fact which is contrary to Christianity, Christianity must be changed."²¹

The shock he experienced at Elder's remark provoked Mathews to read extensively on the topic of evolution. In doing so, he seems to have cast his intellectual net so wide that, as he dryly observes in his autobiography, "I have the impression that I am the only living person who [has] read through Lionel Beale's *Protoplasm*."²²

For those living in the wake of modernity, it is perhaps difficult to appreciate what an intellectual lightning bolt Darwinism was for Western Christian thinkers of the late Victorian period. Reminiscences such as Mathews's concerning the impact of this intellectual revolution have for us the faded charm of locks of children's hair in old family bibles: Can people ever have thought this, have cared so much about the discovery that the biblical account of creation is not literally true? But as crucial documents of this intellectual revolution, such as Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* (1907), indicate, Victorian religionists were correct to see the rise of evolutionism as the beginning of the end of their world, for the paradigm shift that this scientific development represented was one designed not merely to change significantly the way people thought, but how they lived as well. The theory of evolution was integral to a cultural shift out of whose far-reaching effects we still live. Mathews does not overstate the case when he sees his struggle with the idea of evolution as "the beginning of what independent thinking I may have done."²³ In informing his mature work's understanding of how social structures develop, and in providing a framework for his social process theology, evolutionary thought had a profound impact on Mathews and other theologians of the period. Mathews's concern

with the topic of evolution was not confined to the apologetic problem of reconciling Christianity and modern science; the evolutionary metaphor is basic to Mathews's entire theological system.

After his graduation from Colby in 1884, Mathews entered Newton Theological Institution. Although he felt no particular calling, his family (and so he himself) took for granted that his post-graduate study would prepare him for a career in the ministry.²⁴ However, the Newton years ended with Mathews's decision not to receive ordination: *NFO* suggests that he arrived at this decision in part as a result of his conviction that the pastoral fieldwork he had been required to do at the seminary had been a dismal failure.²⁵ Other factors may also have been at work: throughout his theological career, Mathews's lay status was a point of touchy honor with him; his punctilio may indicate that he considered it important for Christian churches of the day to have lay theologians willing to venture into fields which ordained theologians might hesitate to enter.

At Newton Mathews was introduced to biblical exegesis. Having learned Hebrew and Greek, he read the Bible through in its original languages.²⁶ The exegetical method taught at Newton at the time was almost exclusively philological, and higher criticism was presented primarily by way of refutation.²⁷ On the whole, then, Mathews insists, the Newton education did not unsettle his mid-Victorian evangelical presuppositions any more than had the Colby years. As he remarks in *NFO*, "Evangelicalism was too thoroughly presumed to be self-conscious or introspective."²⁸ In 1936, from the vantage point of more than fifty years of involvement in the turbulent events that shaped the course of North American Christianity in the first part of the twentieth century, Mathews remembered his seminary days as ones of uncritical pietism.²⁹

Mathews's memoirs do, however, recount a seminary incident akin to those at Colby that caused him to subject his settled theological presuppositions to critical scrutiny and to move towards his mature theology. Having read Kenningale Cooke's *The Fathers of Jesus* (a pioneering English language work of historical exegesis which the Newton librarian had purchased under the misapprehension that it was a history of the Roman Catholic Society of Jesus), Mathews started to reflect on the historical context of the New Testament writings.³⁰ His persistent questions about the rabbinic background of Paul's theology so vexed his New Testament professor, Alva Hovey, that Hovey set him the task of writing a paper on the topic. In this way, Mathews says, he "came upon what was to be an enduring interest, that is to say, historical study as a means of understanding and evaluating Christian doctrine."³¹

Having graduated from Newton in 1887, Mathews decided on a career in education. A vignette in *NFO* describes in parabolic form both that charming disingenuousness his upbringing and education had inculcated in him, and his emergence from that disingenuousness as he began his professional life. Mathews tells how his discernment that his talents lay in the field of education rather than ministry was "confirmed":

My last year in the theological seminary was to demand decisions as to what in those days seemed to be providential guidance. A few months ago when I was in Madras I was reminded that during the last months of my theological course I made a solemn promise to myself and, as I believed, to my God that I would go to Madras as a missionary if a decision as to a position at Colby was not reached within two weeks. Probably it was fortunate for the work in Madras that the decision was reached and that I became Assistant Professor of Rhetoric and Instructor of Elocution at my *alma mater*.³²

As parabolic *apologia*, *NFO* intends not merely to justify Mathews's own theological divergences from those historic forms in which Christian orthodoxy had found expression for several centuries. The autobiography wants as well to suggest that the course of development followed by a North American Christianity confronting cultural diversity, urbanization, and rapid technological change was to a certain extent inevitable; a church that wishes to remain viable in modern culture must always look back nostalgically on the snows of yesteryear.

Mathews's return to Colby brought him back into close association with Small, whose influence continued to be decisive. When Small became president of Colby in 1888, he had Mathews transferred from the department of rhetoric, in which he was a professor from 1887–89, to Small's former position in the department of history and political economy. Small also encouraged Mathews to do studies in these fields in Germany, and in 1890, having married Mary Philbrick Elden (who had been an acquaintance of several years) on 16 July of that year, he entered the University of Berlin.³³

Theologians commenting on Mathews's theology commonly stress the foundational importance of his year of study in Berlin for his mature theological outlook.³⁴ To some extent, Mathews himself corroborates the judgment that his German education exercised

a constant formative influence on his thought when he insists, as he does in *NFO* and other writings, that the grounding in rigorous critical historical methodology he received in Berlin from historians such as Hans Delbrück and Ignaz Jastrow laid an indispensable foundation for his social process theology.³⁵ Delbrück and Jastrow were close associates of the famous historian Leopold von Ranke. Through these historians, Mathews appears to have been strongly influenced by Ranke's understanding of the historian's task as recovering the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. Though, as historians today note, this assumption that historians can ever have access to the past as it actually was skates rather glibly over insuperable hermeneutical difficulties, Ranke's insistence on thorough and painstaking research represents an important methodological contribution to the field of historiography. In Berlin Mathews was to acquire habits of sound scholarship that were to undergird all his theological research, and to make him acutely aware of the cultural influences at work in every credal formulation at any moment in history. The sociohistorical method that Mathews and his Chicago colleague Shirley Jackson Case were later to pioneer draws on the rigorous, non-apologetic approach to history that these theologians learned in their Berlin studies.³⁶

But historiographical influence is not necessarily theological influence—that is, not in the sense that Mathews's Berlin education was also instruction in German liberal theology. To the chagrin of critics who wish to see liberal theologians as Mathews's primary theological mentors, his autobiography notes that his work in Berlin was so detached from theological interests that, in the year he was there, he heard only one theological lecture, and this not a lecture by Harnack—despite the fact that Harnack's Berlin lectures of the 1890s were attracting flocks of hearers.³⁷ If Mathews's theology does show explicit Harnackian tendencies (and that should probably not be conceded until his works have been combed for explicit references to the German theologian), these tendencies must be attributed to a general impact of German liberal Protestantism on North American theology, rather than to any direct impact deriving from Mathews's year of study in Germany.

In addition to the effect of Ranke mediated through Delbrück and Jastrow, a more decisive influence on Mathews's thought from the Berlin year was Small's teacher Adolf Wagner, a leading proponent of historical economics. From Wagner Small derived that emphatically reformist understanding of effective social change that was to play a determinative role on Mathews's thought. From Wagner to Small to Mathews, a penchant to think in reformist ways clearly informs so-

cial gospel thought. Indeed, Wagner's seminal influence on the movement as a whole has not yet been sufficiently appreciated: in addition to Mathews and Small, such prototypical social gospellers as Ely and Rauschenbusch also expressed indebtedness to Wagner. Through him, the social-construction reading of economic institutions represented by German historical economics powerfully shapes the social and economic thought of the social gospel.³⁸

THE CALL TO CHICAGO

In 1892, Albion Small was made head of the new department of sociology at the new University of Chicago. As Mathews's 1933 autobiographical essay "Theology as Group Belief" notes, when Small went to Chicago, he did so intending to bring Mathews into the department as soon as this could be arranged.³⁹ In accord with this intent, Mathews began an intensive study of the discipline, beginning with the works of Herbert Spencer.⁴⁰ Before Small's plan could be put into effect, however, Mathews was invited by Ernest Dewitt Burton, formerly his professor at Newton, to come to Chicago as associate professor of New Testament. Mathews hesitated to take the position: he did not see his academic work as theological, and a visit to the Columbian Exposition in 1893 had left him with an unfavorable impression of the city.⁴¹

Despite Mathews's misgivings, Burton prevailed, and in 1894 Mathews came to Chicago as professor of New Testament history and interpretation. As *NFO* suggests, a decisive factor in his decision to come to Chicago was the new school's missionary self-understanding.⁴² The possibility of implementing this missionary spirit to effect social reform appealed to the idealistic young theologian with a head full of exciting new sociological ideas.⁴³ His decision to take the Chicago position resolved the tension between Mathews's missionary inclinations and his desire to be a teacher—a tension evident in the inner struggle he underwent prior to taking the Colby position in 1887.⁴⁴

The Chicago context is indispensable for any understanding of the theological thought of Shailer Mathews. The new university saw the role of the educator as not merely imparting knowledge, but actively participating in the making of twentieth-century North American society.⁴⁵ The university was itself an experiment in which new pedagogical techniques were developed. Its emphasis on interdisciplinary work encouraged collaborative research and led to the implementation of novel educational techniques. The concern to

innovate educational methods and the stress on cross-disciplinary conversation reflected the progressivist social philosophy that permeated the thought of the university's founders.

The setting for this novel educational experiment was a city in the rough: as Mathews notes, within its newly minted urban boundaries, the university "sprawled over an all but unredeemed prairie."⁴⁶ The Chicago of the early twentieth century was that of Carl Sandburg's *Chicago Poems*: raw, somewhat unstable on its new legs, but optimistic about its place in the America to be built in the new century. From a small huddle of buildings on the prairie, the city had grown rapidly in the first half of the nineteenth-century to become a large urban center of factories and slaughterhouses. It was in this very American context—with its bustling air and its ethnic and religious diversity, a context very *differently* American than that of his idyllic New England boyhood—that Mathews's career was to unfold and his theological thought take shape. It was this new urban North America that Mathews and other social gospellers intended to evangelize with a fervor akin to the zeal the Puritans brought to their task of building a city on a hill.

As might be expected, the divinity school partook of the missionary spirit of the new university established in this microcosm of America in the making. The president of the university, William Rainey Harper, who had formerly served as professor of New Testament at Morgan Park Seminary, was a dynamic educator who had spearheaded the development of modern methods of teaching Hebrew.⁴⁷ In 1881, he had begun the Institute of Hebrew, a correspondence school whose purpose was to introduce the scholarly study of the Bible to a wide popular audience. To extend the scope of what he called his "democratization of religious scholarship," Harper expanded the work of the institute by creating the American Institute of Sacred Literature (hereafter, AISL) in 1889. This institute operated in conjunction with that phenomenon of North American educational progressivism known as Chautauqua.⁴⁸ In Dorothy Ross's view, Harper was "surely the most entrepreneurial biblical scholar America ever produced."⁴⁹

With Harper's assumption of the presidency of the University of Chicago, the AISL moved to Morgan Park, where it was closely associated with the Divinity School. In 1896, Harper formed a Council of Seventy composed of theological teachers whose expertise was to be made accessible to the community at large through the institute. Mathews was an early member of this council, and under its auspices an indefatigable lecturer on the Institute and Chautauqua circuits.

The missionary self-understanding of the Chicago Divinity School, with its intent to foster the democratization of religious scholarship through the work of the AISL and Chautauqua: these form the matrix of Mathews's theological thought, apart from which it cannot be adequately assessed. The work of the early Chicago school of theology was decidedly evangelical in outlook; its sense of urgency about contributing to the formation of the "social mind" of a rapidly changing, rapidly industrializing America, had affinities with (and saw itself as counter to) the missionary outreach of premillennialists of the period.⁵⁰ When Mathews and his protégés spoke of a culture's "social mind," they intended the term to signify a composite of the culture's preeminent traits and paradigmatic optics for interpreting the social and physical world—a concept not unlike, though far more crudely formulated than, T. S. Kuhn's "paradigm" or Stephen Toulmin's "map" of social reality.⁵¹ Through Harper's journal, the *Biblical World* (hereafter, *BW*), the Divinity School theologians wanted to disseminate the results of current biblical scholarship among North American Christians, and thereby to contribute to shaping a progressivist, idealistic, "Christian" social mind in the nation of their day. No less than premillennialism, the social gospel modernism of the early Chicago school was a strongly evangelical strategy for Christianizing the nation.⁵²

THE PREWAR PERIOD:

Mathews and the Real World

In the educational-cum-missionary ventures established by Harper to democratize religious scholarship, Mathews found his métier. A man of unflagging energy (as was Harper), optimistic and irenic by nature, and little given to torturing self-doubt, Mathews was temperamentally suited to the evangelistic work of the Divinity School. From the beginning of his tenure at the university, he involved himself with gusto in both academic activities and the broader task of shaping the social mind of the nation and its churches, to such an extent that (as we have seen) he felt himself in danger of becoming a "peripatetic loquacity" on the AISL and Chautauqua lecture circuits.⁵³ In 1895, for example, Mathews's schedule included a Chicago AISL course on the history of New Testament times and the life of Christ, six AISL lectures in February at Wheaton College on the times of Jesus, four lectures in March for the Christian Union at the University of Chicago on the times of Jesus, and a summer

AISL course at the University of Chicago on the social history of New Testament times.⁵⁴ These commitments were in addition to his regular classes. In 1936 Mathews estimated that his career had given him the opportunity to lecture at more than 190 colleges.⁵⁵

Mathews's attempt to mold the social mind of the first decade of twentieth-century America was not limited to disseminating the findings of recent theological and biblical scholarship to academic and popular audiences. Since the Divinity School professors viewed themselves as academics with a cause, they sought as well to influence society through active involvement with what they liked to call the "real world," that of business and politics.⁵⁶ Through his editorship of the journal *Christendom*, a short-lived endeavor started in 1903 by a group of progressivist businessmen acting in collaboration with Harper, Mathews commented on "current events from the point of view of Christian idealism."⁵⁷ When *Christendom* failed and merged with the *World Today*, Mathews remained as editor until, in 1911, this periodical also ran into financial difficulties and was bought out by William Randolph Hearst.⁵⁸ In his *World Today* editorials about topics as diverse as Theodore Roosevelt and the reform of football in the twenties, Mathews attempted to reach the social mind of the culture by bringing idealistic considerations to bear on issues of everyday interest to his readers.⁵⁹

In addition, in the prewar years Mathews plunged directly into both politics and progressivist reform activities. With other reform-minded Republicans in Chicago, he entered the turbulent sphere of Chicago politics by assisting in the establishment of the Voter's Clearing House, whose purpose was to screen candidates for the Chicago Republican primaries.⁶⁰ Another cause was the settlement-house movement: soon after his arrival in Chicago, he had visited the settlement sponsored by the University of Chicago, and the experience convinced him that this social reform movement ought to have his strong support. Throughout most of his academic career, Mathews served on the board of the university settlement.⁶¹

Mathews's conviction that "no social revolution in progress is so critical in its influences" as the "epoch-making" feminist movement led him in 1913 to assume the editorship of a series of textbooks entitled the *Woman's Citizen's Library*.⁶² The instigator of the series was the former business manager of the *World Today*, who designed the series to make available to women a wide range of edifying literature that would educate them to make intelligent choices about things political at a moment in which women were being permitted to assume political responsibility in ways unprecedented in United States history. In 1936 Mathews would remark that the en-

franchisement of women had been one of the most significant factors contributing to the development of reformist legislation in the United States in the first part of the century.⁶³

Mathews saw his involvement with the "real world" as one in which a reciprocal effect occurred: not only did he address the economic and political community through his editorials, lectures, and political activism; but this community taught him something as well. From his attempts to instill social idealism in business leaders, with whom he had close ties because of his background, to his grappling with the nitty-gritty problems that social reformers inevitably face when they apply that idealism to the actual structures and situations of the everyday world—in all the multifaceted ways in which he participated in shaping the social mind of his day, Mathews considered himself to have learned valuable lessons about the effectiveness and limits of social reformism. Of these lessons, the one to which he most constantly recurred was that of the need for process, rather than revolution, in social change.⁶⁴ Throughout his career Mathews was to insist that his active engagement with reform in the "real world" had confirmed what he had received from Small and Wagner: that is, that revolutionary programs of social reform rarely succeed, because they too radically disrupt the social order they seek to transform, whereas sober, measured progressivism usually effects long-lasting and ameliorative changes. Clearly, in "proving" to himself the validity of process (as opposed to revolution), Mathews was reaffirming that cautious, conservative outlook with which his bourgeois evangelical upbringing had equipped him.

Mathews gave theological substance to his prewar activism by developing a program of "theological reconstruction." In the prewar years, the phrase connoted a turn beyond liberalism that was occurring in North American theology. North American theologians who promoted theological reconstruction argued that liberal theology, as represented by Harnack and Ritschl, must move in a new direction.⁶⁵ The liberalism of the latter part of the nineteenth century had had a primarily critical intent, a goal of dismantling theological systems constructed on outmoded premises regarding revelation or inspiration. In the view of North American heirs of the liberal project, the emphasis on deconstruction was one-sided: mere leveling of old systems was only half the task lying before post-Enlightenment Christian theology; what must now take place was a *constructive* move, an attempt at theological reconstruction.⁶⁶

As a social gospel theologian, Mathews was committed to such a constructive understanding of the evangelical theological program of the first decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, the extent to

which North American theologians understood the challenge facing twentieth-century theology as reconstruction rather than deconstruction is perhaps a touchstone for the extent to which the social gospel represents a departure from nineteenth-century European liberal theology. As Hutchison and Gorrell have demonstrated, the note of culture crisis in theological writings in the prewar decade was sounded particularly by theologians who identified with the social gospel movement.⁶⁷ When social gossellers spoke of culture crisis, they were speaking in theologically loaded terms; their crisis rhetoric represented a challenge to liberal theology to articulate a sound basis on which Christian churches could involve themselves in social reform. The clear implication of such rhetoric was that a *merely* liberal, merely deconstructive, theology could not meet the crucial needs of a culture in crisis. Mathews cast his lot with such critics of culture Protestantism: when he succeeded William Rainey Harper as editor of the *Biblical World* in December 1912, the editorial announcing the change of editorship noted (tellingly) that under Mathews's direction the journal intended to devote itself to theological reconstruction.⁶⁸

Mathews's prewar reformist activism expressed itself not only in social movements; it also sought ecclesiastical expression. With Harper and the AISL, in 1903 he was instrumental in founding the Religious Education Association, an ecumenical organization that strove to implement John Dewey's pedagogical philosophy in religious education.⁶⁹ In 1907–8, Mathews helped create the Northern Baptist Convention, of which he was president in 1915 and 1916.⁷⁰ In 1912, Mathews became director of religious work for Chautauqua, a position he held until 1934. From 1912 to 1916, he was president of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America. Mathews was also president of the Chicago Council of City Missions (1908–15) and of the Baptist Executive Council of Chicago (1910–19).⁷¹

True to his nature, in the same years in which he engaged in these numerous social and church reform activities, the unflagging scholar also pursued his academic work aggressively, and began an auspicious ascent up the ladder of academic rank. In 1899, he was made junior dean of the Divinity School, and in 1908 succeeded Dean Eri Baker Hulbert to the deanship of the school, a position he held until 1933.⁷² When George Burman Foster ran afoul of the university administrators by publishing *The Finality of the Christian Religion*, a probing Nietzschean reflection on Christianity's claims to absolute truth that rattled the cage of conservative Christians of the day, Harper (who had close ties to John D. Rockefeller and acted as his "surrogate" in the university to discourage radical thought) de-

cided to provide a countervailing theological position in the systematic theology department.⁷³ With his irenic temperament and penchant for cautious reform, Mathews appeared to be the logical choice, and so was transferred to the department in 1906. Until 1933, his professorship in historical and comparative theology was to be his primary academic "housing" at the Divinity School.

During the prewar era, Mathews published extensively. His writings of the period include both numerous journal articles and various books and study guides. While at Colby, he had published a collection of documents for the study of the medieval church in its relation to the empire; this collection, entitled *Select Medieval Documents*, collected materials he had gathered during his year in Berlin. Reprinted as recently as 1974, the volume is still useful to historians.⁷⁴ In 1901 a second historical work, *The French Revolution*, appeared.⁷⁵ This monograph relies strongly on insights regarding social psychology that were coming into vogue as it was published. It applies what Mathews had learned in his study of sociology in the 1890s by arguing that any revolutionary movement presupposes and sets into motion a social psychology of revolution, and attempts to achieve successful revolutionary change must begin with attempts to clarify the underlying psychology of the revolutionary movement. This way of envisaging revolution was to have a strong impact on Mathews's interpretation of the messianism of the Jesus movement in works such as *STJ*, *MHNT*, and *JSI*.

Three prewar works were in the field of New Testament studies. The first of these was *STJ*, which will be examined in detail in the following chapter.⁷⁶ The second book, *A History of New Testament Times in Palestine, 175 B.C.—70 A.D.*, published in 1899 and modelled on Emil Schürer's monumental *Geschichte jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi*, provides a political, social, and religious history of New Testament Palestine.⁷⁷ In accord with the intent of the Chicago theologians to make recent New Testament scholarship accessible to a broad but serious reading public, the study is simultaneously academic and popular. The combination is not always felicitous, however; while the book manages to be readable, it is often tedious and plodding. For those who might wish to plumb the academic depths of the subject, the volume is substantially documented. This history is one in a series of such New Testament handbooks Mathews was to edit during the years 1899–1910.

Mathews's third New Testament study of this period, *The Messianic Hope in the New Testament* (1905), pioneers the application of social psychology to the New Testament period.⁷⁸ Whereas *New Testament Times in Palestine* had approached late Palestinian

Judaism primarily through the external events of political and social life, *MHNT* was "the outgrowth of a growing perception of the real meaning of the history of New Testament times as the history of ideas and social attitudes."⁷⁹ Obviously Mathews's work on the French Revolution was a significant motivating factor in his shift in interpretive focus; in *NFO*, he observes that his attempt to shape the social mind of the real world during this period also influenced his reading of messianism in the 1905 volume.⁸⁰ In addition, the treatise's concentration on the central role played by messianic expectation in the New Testament clearly reflects Mathews's attempt to come to terms with the eschatological school then coming to prominence in German biblical scholarship. Though Mathews himself recognized the dryness of the work—"If being uninteresting is a proof of scientific accomplishment I think I may be very well said to have succeeded in being scientific"⁸¹—the book has earned a secure place in the pantheon of North American biblical scholarship. As we have seen, *MHNT* consolidates the important eschatological turn Mathews took in the period 1897–1905, and for this reason alone deserves recognition among early North American historical critical studies of the scriptures. And that recognition is not entirely lacking: though some historians of North American exegesis have ignored or refused to credit Mathews's acceptance of the eschatological reading of the kingdom of God in the work, other scholars have accorded the book the attention it deserves as a pioneering attempt of North American exegesis to come to terms with consistent eschatology. In the words of F. C. Grant, in exploring the relation of Christianity to its Jewish cultural matrix, in setting early Christianity in its social context, and in aiming at exacting scientific exegesis, subsequent North American exegetical works have "sunk paying shafts into veins of rich ore where he [i.e., Mathews], long ago, began his digging."⁸²

Three books by Mathews in the prewar years are more directly in the popular social gospel vein. In his 1907 *The Church and the Changing Order*, he sought to join sociological analysis to reconstructive theology in order to provide solid sociological and theological grounding for attempts by Christian reformers to deal with those social conditions he had discovered through his involvement with the "real world."⁸³ Coincidentally, the volume appeared almost simultaneously with Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, and when read together, the books provide an instructive diptych of social gospel theology in the first decade of the twentieth century. As did Rauschenbusch's book, *Church and Changing Order* warned of an impending crisis in Western culture, and called for the

application of Christian principles to avert the crisis. In later years Mathews was generously to say that Rauschenbusch's explicitly socialist analysis of the economic order had been more incisive than his own more timid critique—a contrast that will be explored in some detail in the following chapter.⁸⁴

The Gospel and the Modern Man (*GMM*) is a collection of lectures Mathews presented at Haverford College.⁸⁵ Though also in the social gospel vein, the work is more explicitly theological than *Church and Changing Order*. Indeed, it may be seen as a type of twentieth-century *Reden über die Religion* which, as did Schleiermacher's work, reaches for a correlation between evangelical constants and shifting historical thought-patterns. Throughout, Mathews expresses his conviction that a rational apologetics is as much needed today as at any previous transitional period of Christian history. Thus, the basic motif of *GMM* is theological reconstruction—but, in keeping with its social gospel coloring, theological reconstruction with a view to social reconstruction.⁸⁶ The method the study employed was one Mathews had developed when he was transferred to the systematic theology department in 1906: (1) New Testament teaching is presented with historical accuracy; (2) this teaching is critically evaluated; (3) and it is then translated into contemporary thought patterns. In *NFO* Mathews criticizes the indirect Ritschlianism of such an understanding of the task of theology by remarking that its "total effect was a restatement of evangelicalism as if there had not been any contribution to Christianity from the days of the New Testament."⁸⁷

Mathews's other social gospel work of this period is *The Making of To-morrow: Interpretations of the World To-day* (1913), a volume consisting for the most part of editorials reprinted from *Christendom* and the *World Today*. The work's chief interest lies in how it spells out concrete details of Mathews's reformist program of social change. Though some details of this program are now patently dated (as, for instance, when Mathews inveighs passionately against vacations and for whole-year schooling on the ground that children's hands need to be kept from that idleness so inviting to the devil), in other respects they indicate that even the cautiously reformist Mathews (and by implication the social gospel in general) envisaged social changes surpassing many of those considered unthinkable radical today, in the post-Reaganomics United States. For example, he argues that the growth of trusts and the consequent concentration of wealth in the hands of a few play into the hands of socialism. To avert revolution, Mathews calls for repeal of laws permitting formation of trusts and for a progressive inheritance tax.⁸⁸

WORLD WAR I

With the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914, the crisis in Western civilization that social gospellers had seen developing and sought to stave off with the proposals for reform outlined in works such as *Church and Changing Order* and *Christianity and the Social Crisis* reached a climax. The failure of their attempt to stem the tide of crisis in Western culture presented social gospel thinkers with a difficult challenge: on the one hand, they had built their theologies on the premise that Christian idealism could, indeed must, "leaven" cultural development; yet on the other hand, cultural development had not taken the progressivist route expected by the social gospellers. Pre-war optimism about the success of Christian attempts to assist in bending the social process toward the kingdom of God had played the social gospel false. With the war, social gospellers must ask themselves whether fatuity was *inherent* in their theology, or if it was found primarily in their overly sanguine appraisal of cultural development and of the ability of Christian reformers to move that development to idealistic ends.

At the same time, as the war forced social gospellers to engage in such radical self-criticism, another group of North American Christians began to mount an attack on social gospel theology from without. These were the premillennialists, whose belief in the irreformability of the world by human effort and in the need for some final divine intervention via apocalypse as a solution to the mess of history caused them to center on the social gospel's this-worldly reading of the kingdom of God as *the* theological problem of social gospel theology. And, it goes without saying, if the social interpretation of the kingdom was awry, then so were the reform programs of the social gospel: hovering always behind the front in premillennialist sorties against the social gospel were criticisms of social gospel reform programs that presupposed a cultural base radically different from that of the premillennialists themselves, who tended to ally themselves with groups in North American society that looked nostalgically back to the various holiness movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with their resistance to modernity. To say that the premillennialist-social gospel conflict of the World War I period represents a culture war, a battle between conflicting evangelical visions of the future of North American culture, is not to overstate the case. If World War I was a watershed moment for Western culture in general, then, it was no less a watershed for Western Christianity and Western Christian theology. With the war, Christian organiza-