

**The Roots
of
Religious
Liberalism
and
Christian
Agnosticism**



Dan R Smedra

My objective with this short paper was to create an overview/summary of the philosophic roots of *religious liberalism* and so-called *Christian agnosticism*. Many born-again Christians living in the 21st century have little-to-no understanding of the philosophic and religious movements which took place from the 18th through the 20th century, and how those ideas have influenced their own thinking, at least to a degree. The following is a collection of excerpts from the book, *THE WORD OF GOD AND THE MIND OF MAN*, P&R Publishing, 1982, written by the late Dr. Ronald H. Nash. Information contained inside brackets [], **bolding**, and footnotes are supplied by myself.

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THE ROOTS OF RELIGIOUS LIBERALISM AND CHRISTIAN AGNOSTICISM

The last two centuries of Christian theology [within nonevangelical denominations] are the record of an evolving attack on the role of knowledge in the Christian faith. Following the lead of the eighteenth-century philosophers David Hume and Immanuel Kant, **many modern theologians have questioned God's ability to communicate truth to man and undermined man's ability to attain knowledge about God.**

[Religious liberalism is not static. Like a deadly virus, it changes and mutates over time, adapting to the cultural and religious sympathies of the day. In the end, however, an individual's beliefs are reduced to the common denominators of religious humanism and naturalism.]

One of the fundamental postulates of contemporary nonevangelical theory, then, is the claim that God cannot reveal truth to us. And even if God could speak, humans are considered incapable of understanding [due to a variety of reasons] whatever God might be attempting to say.

However, there is nothing in the nature of the divine transcendence that precludes the possibility of our knowing the mind of God. There is nothing irrational or illogical about the content of divine revelation. The Christian God is not the Unknown God of ancient Athens [Acts 17] or modern Marburg [Germany]. He is a God who created men and women as creatures capable of knowing His mind and will and who has made information about His mind and will available in [sovereignly] revealed truths.



David Hume – The divorce of faith and knowledge

The writings of David Hume (1711-1776), like those of Immanuel Kant, are a watershed in the history of philosophy and theology.

Hume's major threat to Christianity comes not from the theories for which he gained notoriety, but rather from his espousal of a notion that has, in fact, become widely held in Christendom¹.

Hume tried to show that most of our pivotal beliefs about reality are matters that human reason is powerless to prove or support.

Hume showed that neither reason nor experience is sufficient to ground a knowledge of these [e.g. causal relations, the external world, and self] matters. But there simply is no other way for them to be known. Therefore, if these pivotal beliefs cannot be known by reason and experience, they cannot be known at all.

Hume believed in the existence of a divine mind that was in some unknown way responsible for the order of the universe.

¹ "Christendom" is a term used to denote the entire sphere of those who consider and call themselves "Christian."

It would have been inconsistent for Hume to attempt to disprove God's existence. His point was that we cannot have any knowledge about God. But [according to Hume] it is entirely natural to have faith that God exists. In fact, the same nature that compels us to hold the pivotal beliefs mentioned earlier leads us to believe in the existence of God.

But nature does not compel us to go beyond this basic belief in God's existence and accept the theological claims added by orthodoxy. Those theological claims must be rejected because they go beyond the limits of human knowledge.

Hume denied the possibility of *any* knowledge about God in general and the possibility of revealed knowledge in particular.

Hume rejected...the possibility of a rational knowledge of God and objective religious truth. Hume grounded man's belief in God in man's nonrational nature. Hume was a precursor of those philosophers and theologians who insist that religious faith must be divorced from knowledge and who believe that the impossibility of knowledge about God will in some way enhance faith. Like Kant, Hume was engaged in denying knowledge in order to make room for faith. To both Hume and Kant, knowledge and faith have nothing in common. The arrogance of rational religion must be destroyed so that faith (a nonrational faith that is) can assume its proper place as the only legitimate ground of religion.

Nonevangelical [liberal] theology since Hume is a chronicle of futile attempts to retain respectability for religious faith while denying religion any right to revealed truth.

Immanuel Kant – Christian agnosticism

German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), encouraged skepticism about the possibility of knowledge about God.

Kant regarded his own system as a veritable Copernican revolution in philosophy.

Philosophers prior to Kant (or so Kant claimed) had assumed that human knowledge is possible only as the mind is adapted to the world. Kant reversed this order. Instead of the mind adapting to the supposed object of its knowledge, all objects are instead adapted to the knowing mind.



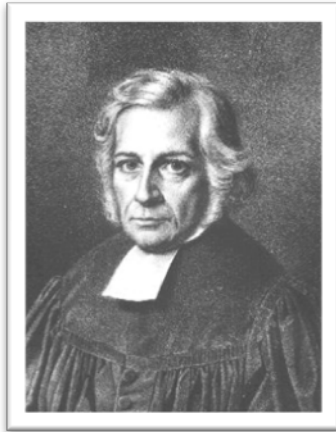
According to Kant, human knowledge never brings us into contact with the real world, what he called the *noumenal* world. All we ever know is the *phenomenal world*, the world as it appears to us after it has been modified by the categories of our understanding. Since our knowledge is always perceptually modified by the a priori categories of the mind, the real world (noumena) is not only unknown but unknowable. [Note: The altered or shifting human consciousness produced by various hallucinogenic drugs seems to confirm, at first glance, Kant's premise. However, Christian *special revelation* uniquely resolves, by supernatural means, the philosophic conundrum of illusion versus reality.]

Kant's God is both unknown and unknowable.

Ironically, Kant thought his agnosticism, with respect to God, was an aid to Christian faith. Kant actually thought he was serving the interests of the Christian religion. He wrote that he had “found it necessary to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for faith.”

For both Hume and Kant, faith and knowledge have nothing in common.

[According to Kant], the Christian should abandon any knowledge-claims about the transcendent and take refuge in a faith grounded not in theoretical but on moral and practical considerations.



Friedrich Schleiermacher – theology of feelings

[The first major source of Protestant liberalism was the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834).]

Schleiermacher thought of his own work as a reaction against Kant’s reduction of religion to an ethical exercise of the will. But despite his protests against Kant, Schleiermacher’s position in the end became an extension of Kant’s theological agnosticism.

Schleiermacher’s [book] *On Religion* went on to reject two [so-called] erroneous approaches to religion. On the one hand, he attacked those who thought of religion primarily as a way of thinking or knowing something. Among those who followed this way were the orthodox [Christians] who stressed the importance of right thinking and correct doctrine. On the other hand, Schleiermacher criticized those who, like Kant, viewed religion primarily as a way of living or doing, as a kind of conduct or character. For Schleiermacher, religion must not be confused either with knowing or with doing. For him, true religion is found in **feeling**.

Schleiermacher

- came to be regarded as the fountainhead of one dominant form of liberalism, namely, the view that it doesn’t matter what a person believes, it is what he *feels* that is important.
- went on to reinterpret most of the major doctrines of Christianity in terms of the **feeling of ultimate dependence** that he regarded as the essence of the Christian faith.
- believed God is unknowable by the human mind; He can only be **felt** in the unique experience of absolute dependence.

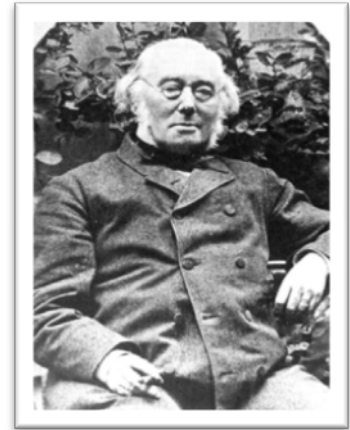
Schleiermacher wrote, “*All attributes which we ascribe to God are to be taken as denoting not something special in God, but only something special in the manner in which the feeling of absolute dependence is to be related to him.*” The divine attributes, then, are not objective properties of God; they are merely reflections of human feelings.

Because of his exaggerated emphasis on divine *immanence* [God is everywhere], Schleiermacher concluded that God is too close to contemplate with any objectivity.

Albrecht Ritschl – theology of a historic Jesus

The second major source of Protestant liberalism was the work of Albrecht Ritschl [1822-1889].

Ritschl protested loudly against Schleiermacher's religious subjectivism and professed to seek a ground for Christian faith that would be more objective and less relativistic than Schleiermacher's. He claimed to find this ground in the objectivity provided by history. Unfortunately, Ritschl's concern for objectivity did not take him very far; for his search within history for objective information about Jesus was selectively controlled by two presuppositions [assumptions] he borrowed from Kant.



Like Kant, Ritschl excluded metaphysics² from theology.

This meant that the Jesus whom Ritschl "found" in history was a Jesus conveniently matched to his own liberal presuppositions.

Ritschl borrowed from Kant...the conviction that what ultimately counted in religion was ethics.

Ritschl, like Kant, turns out to be an antimetaphysical moralist who rejects theological speculation about such traditional concerns as Christology [Christ's divinity] and soteriology [doctrine of redemption].

According to Ritschl, the only sure information about Jesus is his moral teaching.

In spite of all Ritschl's professed concern about an objective basis for faith in history, he ends up founding the Christian religion [i.e., his humanistic version] on the shifting sands of a person's religious consciousness.



Neo-Orthodoxy – a new spin on religious skepticism

Although Hume started the ball rolling, the two dominant forms of theological skepticism in the nineteenth century (Schleiermacher and Ritschl) largely followed the lead of Kant. As Protestant liberalism evolved in the first quarter of the twentieth century, its God increasingly came to resemble the pantheistic³ deity of Schleiermacher. Naturally, any cognitive communication from such a God is impossible.

² Metaphysics is a term used to denote the investigation of principles of reality transcending those of the physical sciences. It also seeks to deal with the fundamental nature of being (ontology) and the world (cosmology).

³ *Pan* = all; *theistic* = belief in the existence of a god. Thus, God is All; All is God.

The liberal God could not speak because He was totally immanent in nature; He lacked personality.

[Into this realm, European theologians Karl Barth (1886-1968), Emil Brunner (1889-1966), Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), and Paul Tillich (1886-1965) advanced new spins on religious skepticism. In America, H. Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962) echoed his European counterparts.]

Barth rejected the immanence-theology of [19th century] liberalism (which he himself had formerly held) in favor of a new emphasis on divine *transcendence* (Latin: of climbing or going beyond) that he had learned from Kierkegaard, Luther, and Scriptures. Unfortunately, this totally transcendent or wholly other God was no more able to communicate knowledge or truth than the immanent deity of Schleiermacher.

This network of ideas accounts for what is perhaps the central phalanx in the contemporary assault on the knowability of God. It can be summed up in the statement that *no revelation is propositional*⁴.

Proponents of the non-propositional view of revelation then simply assert the impossibility of any cognitive knowledge about God and insist that God reveals Himself, not through propositions, but through personal presence or encounter. Revelation is exclusively an event in which God reveals Himself; it is *never* a disclosure of information about God or anything else.

For Brunner, revelation “is not the communication of intellectual knowledge of a doctrine about God, but God’s own personal Word.” Revelation is an event which is transcendent, unique, absolute, personal, and unrepeatable. In this revelatory encounter, there is no revealed truth.

Brunner found an interesting example of his position in the labels the RCA Victor Company once used on its phonograph records. Those labels depict a dog faithfully listening to an old Gramophone. The message on the label read, “His Master’s Voice.” Brunner thought this was an excellent illustration of the Bible’s role in revelation. A Christian listening to the Bible cannot help but hear the scratches and distortions on the surface of the old record. But through the imperfections, he nonetheless hears *his* Master’s voice. Though the Bible itself is not the Word of God, nevertheless we can hear the Word of God through the Bible.

Opposition to revelation as propositional truth was also shared by Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann rejected the position that revelation is “the communication of knowledge or of doctrine.” He would have nothing to do with any view that allowed one to speak of God in “generally valid sentences...that are true apart from a connection to the concrete existential situation of the speaker.” The human agent of revelation, Bultmann maintained, never appears as a communicator of teaching.

Paul Tillich also adhered to the noncognitive view. For Tillich, “there are not revealed doctrines, but there are revelatory events and situations which can be described in doctrinal terms...The ‘Word of God’ contains neither revealed commandments nor revealed doctrines.” It comes as no surprise then to find Tillich opposed to viewing the Bible as the Word of God.

Niebuhr was typical of those American theologians who helped impart the noncognitive view of revelation to theological students on this side of the Atlantic. According to Niebuhr, the meaning of

⁴ A proposition is an assertion of fact.

revelation “cannot be expressed in the impersonal ways of creeds or other propositions but only in responsive acts of personal character.”

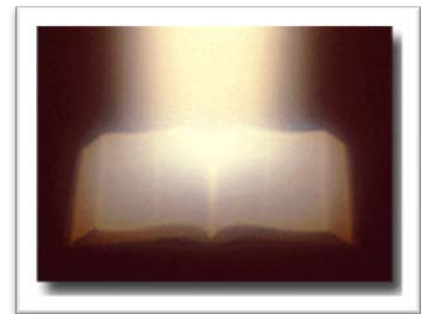
All of this would have come as surprising news to the Reformers, to Aquinas and Anselm, to Augustine, to the fathers of the church, as well as to [the Apostle] Paul and the other human authors of the New Testament.

Certainly, the personal dimension of revelation is important. God’s revelation must become alive and dynamic in the present experience of the [born again] believer, through the action of the Holy Spirit. The weakness of the noncognitive approach to revelation lays not so much in what its advocates affirmed as in what they ignored and denied.

[Protestant liberalism culminates in attempts to reconcile science and humanism with traditional Christianity, stresses the ethical teachings of Jesus and a *social gospel*, envisions God as a co-worker in the task of reforming the world, and believes human nature is essentially good. It is no coincidence that scores of liberal political figures credit Hume, Kant, and the cast of unorthodox theologians for their so-called “enlightenment.”]

Christian Special Revelation – Historic Evangelicalism

["*God said it, I believe it, and that settles it!*"] While this statement may be workable for some, others need a more detail understanding of how God communicates His mind/thoughts to us with veracity.]



The noncognitive or nonpropositional view of revelation, that has been dominant in nonevangelical Protestant theology for so long, seemed more persuasive than it should have for one basic reason.

Proponents of the noncognitive view misrepresented (unintentionally, I believe) the alternative to their position. Advocates of the nonpropositional thesis would have everyone think that the evangelical alternative to their view is indeed the extreme claim that **all** revelation is propositional.

Classical Christian orthodoxy certainly wishes to maintain that God reveals truth and that knowledge of this truth is an essential component in personal relationship to the Creator. But it is equally clear that some divine revelation assumes forms that are not propositional.

Basic to the evangelical position is the claim that we *can* have cognitive information about God. This position *does not* claim that *all* revelation must be cognitive or reducible to human language. It asserts only that some revelation is cognitive and has been expressed in human language [e.g., the Bible].

Whatever God reveals and whichever means He uses in revelation, His purpose is to bring people into a personal, saving, loving, serving relationship with Himself. Evangelicalism [together with all Christian fundamentalism] insists that personal knowledge of God is not in competition with propositional knowledge about God.

[Historic] orthodoxy affirms that some revelation is encounter and some revelation is communication. The two modes of revelation complement each other. To experience genuine encounter requires information about God and about human need for God. In order to distinguish genuine encounter from the ever-present threat of spurious religious experience, we need information about God.

Scripture recognizes a distinction between true and false doctrine. Those who preach false doctrine are worthy of God's most severe judgment (Gal. 1:69; 1 John 4:1; 5:10-12). The [genuine] Christian is obliged to recognize this distinction. But just how does the Christian come to know true doctrine? Those who deny propositional revelation argue that the cognitive assertions that constitute church doctrine arise from reflection about a noncognitive encounter, one that discloses no information. But if this is true, if God never reveals truth to man, where does the neo-orthodox theologian receive *his* information from?

No ultimate antithesis between [God the Holy] "Spirit" and "Truth" is possible... It is not a case of the Spirit without the Scriptures, nor is it a case of the Scriptures without the Spirit. The Spirit cannot do His work without the Scriptures and the Scriptures cannot do theirs without the Spirit. Revelation is not a matter of Spirit only, but of Spirit and Truth. God's word is "truth," God's work is by the [Holy] "Spirit." The two go together. H. D. McDonald

Evangelicals must beware lest their emphasis on revelation inscripturated in human language should degenerate into a de-emphasis of the living and active nature of God's speaking. The God whose voice can raise the dead is not one who can be limited by "dead" words. The activity of the Spirit of God [Third Person of the Trinity] insures the vitality of God's revelation. God speaks and His word is recorded. He continues to speak through that record; and those words live, energized by the Spirit of God.

The role of the [Holy] Spirit raises the issue of the relation between the objective and subjective poles of revelation. It is one thing for revelation to be objectively given though divinely aided speakers. It is quite another for that revelation to be received and understood. Neo-orthodoxy over-emphasized the subjective side of revelation at the expense of its objective side. Evangelicals must reject the claim that Scripture is not revelation but only becomes revelation when illuminated by the Spirit. The basic error of religious subjectivists is that they confuse the proclamation or delivery of truth with the reception of truth.