Annette G. Aubert


The “transnational turn” in historical studies in recent years has been fruitful for the study of nineteenth-century theology, a subject still usually treated within national contexts. Annette Aubert’s The German Roots of Nineteenth-Century American Theology provides a welcome addition to such transnational perspectives. Aubert examines the work of two nineteenth-century Reformed theologians in the United States—Princeton Seminary theologian Charles Hodge (1797–1878) and Mercersburg theologian Emanuel Vogel Gerhart (1817–1904)—to find significant engagement with German theology, albeit in very different ways. As American Protestant theology developed into a specialized professional field in the decades after 1815, American academic theologians found it necessary to engage German theologians, widely regarded throughout the North Atlantic as the leading developers of theology as a “science” (Wissenschaft). By focusing on two American theologians, Aubert shows that the broad German school of “mediating theology” (Vermittlungstheologie) generated both positive appropriations (Gerhart) and more negative reactions (Hodge) in American theology in the middle of the century.

The book begins with chapters that explore the wider intellectual and theological contexts of the work of Gerhart, Hodge, and their contemporaries. The first chapter considers a variety of relevant contexts for nineteenth-century American theologians, with particular attention to transatlantic intellectual contexts and the avenues for reception of German ideas in the United States. A second chapter surveys the thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher, who was quite influential in Protestant theology in Germany and abroad. He was especially important for the mediating theologians who continued his project of harmonizing traditional Protestant doctrine with modern Wissenschaft. Aubert’s third chapter on these German mediating theologians constitutes the best survey of this group available in English. Aubert reviews and synthesizes much of the German-language scholarship on these theologians, while also using extensive primary sources to introduce the thought of the major figures in the group, including Carl Ullmann, Friedrich August Tholuck, Karl Hagenbach, and Isaac Dorner. This introduction to the German mediating theologians is a great help to students of American theology, since these Germans were among the most important European influences on American theology in the nineteenth century, as contemporaries noted and as Aubert shows.

The later chapters examine in detail the work of Gerhart and Hodge in order to demonstrate how European influences shaped their ideas, especially in their
approach to theological method and in regard to their theories of the atonement. Like the earlier Mercersburg theologians John Williamson Nevin and Philip Schaff, Gerhart positively appropriated the German mediating theology—though not without some modification—in both his theological method and his understanding of the atonement. This amounted to a more Christocentric Reformed theology: he followed the German mediating theologians in making the doctrine of Christ the central dogma (Zentraldogma) in his system, and his theory of the atonement likewise made the atonement dependent on the person of Christ and his incarnation. Hodge, on the other hand, was more critical of the mediating theology, given that his engagement with it often took the form of critique rather than appropriation. In both his theological method and atonement theory, Hodge stayed closer to seventeenth-century Reformed orthodoxy. Yet even Hodge fashioned his theology with the aid of contemporary German imports. Aubert argues that Hodge borrowed notions of theology as a science from mediating theologian Friedrich August Tholuck, whom Hodge studied with at Halle, and that he often relied on the current exegetical work of Tholuck and other German scholars. Hodge also developed many of his views with reference to Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg, Hodge’s former professor at Berlin, a more traditionally orthodox theologian than the mediating theologians.

Aubert’s selection of theologians reveals the variety of effects that German influences had within nineteenth-century American Reformed theology. She convincingly makes the case that Gerhart’s theology was an American outgrowth of the German mediating theology. But Aubert argues that Hodge cannot be considered a mediating theologian—here she revises Walter Conser’s earlier interpretation of Hodge in God and the Natural World—despite his significant engagement with the mediating theology. With Hodge, the wider significance of this German influence for American theology is apparent: as theologian and principal at one of the largest seminaries in the nation, Hodge was a prominent figure who trained more graduate students than any other American professor of his time (Gutjahr 2011: 4). With Gerhart, though, Aubert lacks a clear argument for his (and the Mercersburg theology’s) wider significance.

One of the advantages of the book’s focus on two individuals is that it helps to ground the history of ideas in concrete relationships and material culture. Aubert’s archival research reveals, for instance, the relationships that Hodge formed while studying in Germany and how these relationships continued through correspondence and the transatlantic exchange of books and periodicals, ultimately with consequences for his theology. Even more of such details, especially in the case of Gerhart and his connections to Germany via the other Mercersburg theologians, would broaden the book’s appeal, as would greater