Introduction

Nineteenth-century liberalism was characterized by a distinctive emphasis on the doctrine of divine immanence, as observed by numerous writers at the end of the century and the beginning of the next. For example, reflecting on the theology of the nineteenth century, Arthur Cushman McGiffert identified divine immanence as the characteristic doctrine of the age. Standing just inside the doorstep of the twentieth century, Francis J. McConnell noted that the concept of divine immanence was the most absorbing theme in contemporary theology. Writing just a few years later in 1914, Hugh Ross Mackintosh remarked, “No conception has seized the modern mind more powerfully than that of divine immanence.” Clearly, the doctrine of divine immanence was a topic that captivated the minds of many theologians at the turn of the century.

At the close of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, American theological liberals were busy carving out a “third way” between rationalistic atheism and orthodox Christianity by positing a new theology based largely on the twin ideas that divine authority is not tied to an inerrant book and that God should not be viewed as completely distinct from the material world. When put in positive terms, this latter concept was often expressed by the phrase divine immanence. Numerous books were written around the turn of the century arguing that the pressing theological need was to move toward a new understanding of God as immanent in the world and working in and through the physical universe in a way quite different from that taught by orthodox theology. Many conservatives firmly denounced liberal assertions about God’s immanence as heterodox and destructive to true religion. However, at least one conservative theologian, Augustus Hopkins Strong (1836–1921), attempted to wed orthodox theology to a new understanding of divine immanence. The result was something that Strong called ethical monism.

The Riddle of Augustus Hopkins Strong

Strong was in many ways a puzzling figure. As president and professor of biblical theology at Rochester Theological Seminary for four decades (1872–1912),
Strong shaped a generation of seminary students. As a leader among Northern Baptists, he played a significant role in the denomination during the years leading up to the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. As the author of numerous books, including a major systematic theology, Strong influenced the thinking of countless theologians and pastors. He was by any measure an important figure in American theology at the beginning of the twentieth century, yet Strong has persistently baffled historians.

Grant Wacker noted that Strong’s interpreters have generally placed him in one of four categories: (a) an early fundamentalist who was both irenic and open-minded, (b) a conservative theologian struggling to preserve Reformed orthodoxy in a modern world, (c) a mediator between liberalism and orthodox theology, or (d) “a closet liberal hiding behind the garments of apparent orthodoxy.” Wacker himself never indicated which of these categories he thought best described Strong. Instead, he argued that “Strong is best understood as a tragic figure, forced to choose between incompatible yet, in his judgment, equally cogent conceptual worlds.”

Part of the difficulty in interpreting Strong lies in some of his own enigmatic statements and actions. Near the end of his life Strong wrote, “I am an evolutionist, but evolutionist of a peculiar sort. . . I am a higher critic, but of a certain sort. . . I am both a premillennialist and a postmillennialist, strange as this may seem to some.” If these self-appellations appeared somewhat less than consistent, so did a number of his decisions during his presidency at Rochester Theological Seminary. For example, in the late 1880s Strong, along with several other faculty members at Rochester, expressed serious concern about the orthodoxy of their promising young student Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918). Strong once told Rauschenbusch that his essay on Horace Bushnell’s theory of the atonement, although of very high quality, was “subversive of scripture.” In fact, the theological errors Strong detected in this essay prompted him to offer several “corrective lectures” to the entire class. This was not the only time Rauschenbusch expressed his affinity for unorthodox views during his student days. Shortly before graduation, Rauschenbusch preached a chapel sermon in which he described personal conversion in terms of liberal presuppositions. Although Strong had significant reservations about his student’s doctrinal fidelity, about a decade later Strong hired Rauschenbusch to teach at Rochester, even though the younger man had only continued the departure from orthodoxy since graduation. If Rauschenbusch were the only modernist Strong added to the Rochester faculty, one might regard it as an isolated lapse of judgment, but he was not: during his forty-year tenure Strong also hired other liberal scholars, such
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as William Arnold Stevens (1877), Walter R. Betteridge (1891), J. W. A. Stewart (1903), Cornelius Woelfkin (1905), and Conrad Henry Moehlman (1907). Another factor contributing to the dilemma of interpreting Strong stems from the fact that his own theology evolved considerably during his career at Rochester. The most significant change in his theology occurred in the early to mid-1890s, when he developed ethical monism.

Strong’s explanation of ethical monism did not change substantially over the years. In the final edition of his Systematic Theology, Strong defined ethical monism as a “method of thought which holds to a single substance, ground, or principle of being, namely, God, but which also holds to the ethical facts of God’s transcendence as well as his immanence, and of God’s personality as distinct from, and as guaranteeing, the personality of man.” In other words, he held to an ontological monism coupled with a personal pluralism. Strong believed that all that exists is ultimately one, but he recognized the existence of multiple personalities within this one thing. Strong viewed his doctrine of ethical monism as striking the proper and difficult balance between the truth of God’s transcendence and the reality of his immanence in the world. He saw ethical monism as giving unity to all existence while preserving personal responsibility. He eventually came to regard this ethical monism as the “key to theology.”

Questions to Be Answered

The primary purpose of this book is to examine the role ethical monism played in Strong’s theology and ministry. I also explore several related questions: What factors in Strong’s own life and cultural milieu may have prompted him to embrace ethical monism? What relationship did Strong’s ethical monism have to the philosophical idealism of his forbears? What tendencies in Strong’s earlier theology may have led him to develop ethical monism as a distinct theological concept? What impact did ethical monism have on Strong’s larger theological system? Answering these questions provides greater insight into both Strong’s thought and his significance.

In this book, I argue that ethical monism was Strong’s attempt to reconcile Christian theology and modern thought while solving tensions within his own theology. Strong hoped to bring together modernists and conservatives around the theological common ground of ethical monism. In the end, he was unable to persuade modernists to embrace ethical monism or to convince conservatives that ethical monism was a legitimate theological option. Strong’s attempt at a theological synthesis failed largely because of the contradictions ethical monism
produced within both Christian theology and philosophical monism. Yet his attempt sheds light on the philosophical and theological commitments of both conservatives and liberals around the beginning of the twentieth century.

Importance of the Study

Because Strong viewed ethical monism as the “key to theology,” properly understanding this concept and its relationship to his theological system is foundational to correctly understanding his overall theology and his unique contributions to theology. As an influential figure within the Northern Baptist Convention, Strong hoped to bring together both liberals and conservatives around the idea of ethical monism. Although Strong failed in this ecumenical effort, his attempt to do so is highly instructive, and an examination of ethical monism may help explain his ecumenical ambitions.

Strong’s forty-year presidency at the Rochester Theological Seminary showcased his desire to bring together conservatives and liberals. Under his leadership, theological liberals took the school much further left than Strong’s personal theology would have suggested, establishing theological liberalism at the seminary. This change had a significant impact on the theological direction of many of the seminary’s graduates and the churches they pastored.

No full-length biography of Strong has ever been written. Various reference works and survey texts give short sketches of his life, but most overlook the role ethical monism played in his life and thought, which affected how Strong viewed the entire world. For Strong, ethical monism was a major part of his contribution to the theological world. Chapter 1 helps explain how Strong’s biography and theology were more closely related than often acknowledged.