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A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

3. Philip Schaff, **History of the Christian Church**, 1899, IV, p.238.
4. Oliver Cromwell, **Letters and Speeches**, ed. Thomas Carlyle, 1871, 4, pp.250-51.
5. John Milton, **Areopagitica**, in **The Harvard Classics**, ed. Charles W. Eliot, 1937, 3, pp.222-25.
6. Edwin Scott Gaustad, **Historical Atlas of Religion in America**, revised edn., 1976, p.168.
7. David F. Wells and John D. Woodbridge, eds., **The Evangelicals**, revised edn., Grand Rapids, 1977, p.10.
8. **Civil Religion and the Presidency**, p.15.
9. Robert Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', **Daedalus**, 96/1, 1967, pp.1-21. This thesis is more fully developed in Robert N. Bellah, **The Broken Covenant**, 1975.
10. **Civil Religion and the Presidency**, p.291.

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ENGLISH DISSENT: DISSOLUBLE OR DISSOLUTE?

Mark D. Johnson, *The Dissolution of Dissent, 1850-1918*, Garland Publishing, New York & London, 1987, xxiii + 345pp. $55.

In this welcome and provocative book Dr Johnson seeks to show how English Dissent, as represented by Congregationalism, dissolved into a bland ecumenism as social impediments were removed, and as the desire to take their due place in society (exemplified by the story of Mansfield College, Oxford) undermined traditional dissidence. He anchors the intellectual history in the socio-political context of the times, thereby drawing our attention to important sources which those concerned only with the period's significant thinkers may leave uninvestigated.

There are five substantial chapters. The first, entitled 'From the Old Evangelicalism to the New: The Theological Education of Robert William Dale', sets out from Dale's view that Evangelical individualism contributed to the slackening of the Dissenters' grip upon ecclesiology. Not least by subtly re-writing Dissenting history at crucial points, Dale managed to articulate a new Evangelicalism, attuned to the aspirations of the growing Nonconformist middle class, accommodating those modifications of scholastic Calvinism which recent evangelistic practice seemed to require. The theological transformation is illustrated by reference to the Carrs Lane succession of John Angell James and Dale. The influence of F. D. Maurice upon Dale is shown to have been formative; John Campbell's doomed rearguard action against the 'increase of German error' is noted, as is Dale's 'hearty admiration' of the socio-politically prophetic Edward Miall. The mood captured by Binney's declaration that 'It is not wrong to be rich', and that Congregationalism's special mission was to the middle classes; and the Unitarian George Dawson's (undiscriminating) allegation that the ethical stance of the early Evangelicals was largely other-worldly, are revealed as further factors in Dale's formation. As Dale's theological position matured, he set the older Evangelical emphasis upon the Cross within the broader framework of the Incarnation; though with the passage of time he came to regret the loss of the sense that 'sin is an awful offence', and that Christ is Lord and not only Brother. In Chapter II 'The Leicester Conference' of 1877 (which A. J. Grieve described as 'a small theological breeze') is described and analysed. Johnson rightly views the episode as indicative of Congregational anxiety at the erosion of communal life in face of 'spiritual'-liberal (albeit internally discordant) emphases. The theological role of James Baldwin Brown, who mediated the thought of McLeod Campbell, Erskine of Linlathen (whose final 'e' and necessary qualifying phrase are omitted in both text

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and index) and, supremely, of Maurice, is carefully delineated. The pantheism of James Allanson Picton, and the tendencies towards, and the reactions against, Unitarianism are recorded, as is the impact of Edward White's doctrine of the annihilation, rather than the eternal punishment, of unbelievers. The crusade for disestablishment and the Bulgarian atrocities are likewise part of the picture.

'The Crisis in the Colleges' is the subject of Chapter III. The Congregationalists became increasingly concerned that their colleges, whose tutors were required by financial stringency to be polymaths even if they were not, were failing to produce doctrinally sound and culturally acceptable ministers. Hence the removal in 1886 of Spring Hill College from Birmingham to Oxford, where it became Mansfield College. In the establishment of Mansfield (Chapter IV), the part played by Dale, a belated convert to the idea, was crucial; as was the self-sacrificial resignation of Spring Hill's principal, D. W. Simon - the originator of the Oxford idea. Simon became Principal of the Scottish Congregational Theological Hall, thereby easing Fairbairn's path from Airedale to Mansfield. The activities of R. F. Horton within the University of Oxford are rightly given prominence (though his book, *The Dissolution of Dissent* - an outcome for which he saw no necessity - is not here discussed). Horton attempted, *via* the Oxford University Nonconformists Union, to promote the positive values of Free Churchmanship. The contribution of Mansfield's first Principal is accurately assessed; and the rueful conclusion is that, despite all the hopes surrounding Mansfield, its New Puritanism was in reality a further sign of the bankruptcy of Nonconformity: Nonconformists have 'no other well-defined purpose than to find an acceptable place for themselves in the mainstream'(224).

So to a chapter entitled 'From the New Puritanism to Ecumenism: Mansfield College, 1886-1918'. Ritschlianism is shown to have been the theology which led towards ecumenism, for Ritschl attempted to divorce religion from theoretical knowledge, and this facilitated churchly co-operation. Mansfield's early days, its teachers, its financial difficulties, its failure to galvanise the University's growing number of Nonconformist students, the impact upon the College of the 'higher criticism', the plea for social relevance, the implications of Hegelianism, Frank Lenwood and the Student Christian Movement - all of these and more are discussed.

Johnson concludes: 'As Congregationalists lost confidence in the validity of their polity and their political character by the end of the century, Mansfield sought legitimacy through the ecumenical movement, for ecumenism offered Nonconformity a form of official recognition and acceptance within a catholic federation of the Churches ... Ecumenism was the final phase in the dissolution of Dissent' (299-300).

Dr Johnson's work is based upon wide, if not exhaustive, reading, and we are greatly in his debt for his accounts of Dale, Horton and others; for his discriminating study of Mansfield's formative years; and especially for his perceptive treatment of the Leicester Conference. A handful of typographical slips does not unduly disturb; neither does the question of definition in the statement that the 1747 secession from the Old Meeting, Birmingham, was prompted by *Unitarian* influence(12). More serious is the anachronistic assertion that 'Congregationalism represented the attempt to return to what Congregationalists believed to be the *democratic* polity of the first-century Church' (9; my italics). This is corrected overleaf by Dale: 'Each Christian assembly stood in the immediate presence of Christ, and was directly responsible to Him'. That is, Congregationalists sought to be Christocentric. We have here an example of a running weakness in this book: the lack of careful definition of terms, which leads to some one-sided judgments.

Consider the judgment: 'during the nineteenth century the largest English Nonconformist bodies possessed no outstanding theologians. There was no Coleridge or Maurice among them, nor even a Benjamin Jowett (xvi). But how is 'outstanding'

to be defined? There are occasions in Christian theology when new departures are made and, undeniably, Coleridge, Maurice and 'even' Jowett were catalysts in this respect. There are also times when what is required are highly-skilled theological 'middlemen', who can assimilate, process and hand on a welter of new ideas in such a way that the Church is edified and not rent asunder. This was the work which was preeminently required in the second half of the nineteenth century. That during such a period the Nonconformists should have produced such thinkers as Dale, Fairbairn, Pope and Martineau is - especially give the inadequacies of their theological colleges, of which Dr Johnson more than once reminds us - at least moderately remarkable. Moreover, after 1860 the Church of England did not produce another Coleridge, Maurice or 'even' Jowett, Oxford and Cambridge notwithstanding.

Again, Johnson advises that P. T. Forsyth was 'perhaps the last important theologian English Nonconformity produced' (xvi). It has seriously been suggested (by Emil Brunner, for example) that Forsyth was the greatest theologian to emerge from *any* English denomination this century. But what is the analysis of 'important'? It does appear that Nonconformists have, during the twentieth century, excelled in Biblical studies: (C. H. Dodd, T. W. Manson, V. Taylor, G. Caird, with the Baptists, H. W. Robinson, T. H. Robinson, H. H. Rowley and A. R. Johnson cornering the Old Testament market, along with the Methodist N. H. Snaith). There have been notable Nonconformist church historians: W. T. Whitley, E. A. Payne, A. G. Matthews, A. Peel, J. Wilkinson, and E. G. Rupp. Nevertheless, the varied contributions of such theologians as A. E. Garvie, C. J. Cadoux, R. S. Franks, John Oman, H. H. Farmer and others should not be underestimated.

Next, there is the question of method and perspective. Johnson fastens upon Congregationalism as being the most politically prominent Nonconformist denomination at the beginning of his period; and upon Mansfield College, 'the institution through which the best of the Congregational ministry was absorbed into the "mainstream" of national life' (163). This selection poses unanswered questions. Were the more traditional Dissenting attitudes more faithfully preserved by other denominations and/or by other Nonconformist (including Congregational) colleges? Whether justifiably or not, Mansfield has been accused from time to time - even by a few of its alumni - of 'apeing the Anglicans', of succumbing to 'liturgical fusspottery' and the like. How does the drop-out rate of Congregationalism's 'best' ministers compare with that of those from other colleges? By the outbreak of World War I, only 50% of the total of Mansfield's graduates remained in the ministry. (c) Without some reference to colleges contemporary with Mansfield, may not readers be left with the impression that Mansfield, which was raised upon the ruins of less adequate nineteenth-century colleges, failed to a large extent and all was lost? This would be to overlook positive developments elsewhere. At one period the General Secretary of the Union and four of the nine Moderators (none from Mansfield) were trained at Yorkshire United Independent College. At another period Lancashire Independent College, *via* its association with the University of Manchester, offered theological courses second to none in comprehensiveness and rigour. Mansfield itself produced almost twice as many (14) English Congregational theological college Principals during the period from 1920 to the present as all the other colleges together. Of these, half were decently knowledgeable concerning Dissent, and two or three notorious for it! The list of Mansfield-trained scholars, principled ecumenists, missionaries and 'working ministers' is likewise not unimpressive.

The most serious difficulty comes when Johnson nominates ecumenism as an important culprit in the dissolution of (Congregational) Dissent. There are two main aspects of the problem, both questions of definition. 'Ecumenism' is not subjected to detailed analysis. He seems to encompass the unprincipled 'if you can't beat 'em

join 'em' attitude, and the 'co-operation in good works' and 'huddling together for warmth' motives (299,290,21,253,277). That these prevailed in some quarters cannot be denied, but there was something more. Johnson quotes Fairbairn accurately: 'It is perhaps harder to be a Nonconformist today than it has ever been in the history of England. The very decay of the disabilities from which our fathers suffered has made it harder for us than it was to them to dissent'(169). He omits Fairbairn's next sentence: 'But while it has become harder it has also become more necessary: for the need of the testimony to a Church in which Christ is supreme was never so great as now'. No doubt the testimony was inadequately made; but Johnson's failure to give due weight to a more positive understanding prevents him from considering the possibility that Dissenters were right to seek the fulfilment of their Dissenting catholicity in an ecumenism in which the gospel of God's grace took precedence.

'Congregationalism' is defined in this book too much in terms of the autonomy of the local church. No doubt this is a slippery subject, and the oscillation between independence, interdependence, autonomy and catholicity has characterised Congregationalism through the centuries. Nevertheless the assertion that 'The independence of each individual church was *the* cardinal principle of Congregationalism' (91) would have had a different ring in the seventeenth century from what it came to have in the nineteenth when the decibels of individualism were increased in the wake of the Enlightenment. If these subtleties are not teased out, it is impossible to understand why many Congregationalists have regarded the attempts of genuine ecumenism to manifest God's given unity in Christ as worthy of their support, and as consistent with their testimony that the one Lord of the Church gathers his saints into a catholic fellowship manifested locally.

Had there been *no* socio-political disabilities, the questions 'Who is a Christian?', 'Who are the Church?', 'How are the crown rights of the Redeemer to be honoured in his Church?' and 'what are the proper relations between Church and State?' - *the* questions of Dissent - would still have required attention, and they still do. Precisely because of the removal of most of the socio-political impediments, deep theological discussion of these questions is, in principle, possible. Over and above the abiding importance of the questions, such discussion is necessary now when societal marginalisation afflicts all the English denominations; and the confessionally-varied established churches are in international dialogue with those of the Dissenting traditions. Will the questions be raised? This is to ask whether Dissent really has been dissolved, or whether it is simply, and perhaps temporarily, dissolute.

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REVIEWS

Paul S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988. £29.50. ISBN 0 19 826686 3.

In British theology since the late nineteenth century there has been a strong tradition of reflection on the suffering of God, challenging - in greater or lesser degrees - the notion of divine impassibility which had been a scarcely ever questioned part of traditional Christian theism since the Fathers. In this respect British (and to a lesser extent American) theologians pioneered a theological development which has since been taken up by many other theologians. So it is appropriate that a British theologian should now have written one of the most thorough and penetrating treatments of this subject, which in his hands becomes a wide-ranging treatment of the doctrine of God and God's relation to the world. He makes, however, rather