

# Theological tinkering

by [Christopher H. Evans](#) in the [November 6, 2002](#) issue

*The Puritan as Yankee: A Life of Horace Bushnell.* By Robert Bruce Mullin. Eerdmans, 296 pp., \$21.00 paperback.

Horace Bushnell (1802-1876) is "more often talked about than read," this volume in Eerdmans's Library of Religious Biography series declares. Church historian Robert Bruce Mullin sheds new light on one of the most enigmatic figures in the history of American theology. Rather than giving the usual interpretation of Bushnell as a pioneer of 19th-century American theological liberalism, Mullin portrays him as an orthodox figure who attempted to redefine the earlier Puritan theological and cultural heritage of his native New England. Although Mullin concedes that Bushnell was an important theological innovator, he was also "a great tinkerer, always interested in improving that which he found before him."

Mullin's interpretation of Bushnell as a theological "tinkerer" works well in his reassessment of Bushnell's major theological writings, including the seminal volumes *Christian Nurture*, *God in Christ* and *Nature and the Supernatural*. Mullin paints a portrait of a conservative yet innovative thinker, a theologian who sought to modify New England theological orthodoxy to meet the needs of Americans living in his generation (for example, many of Bushnell's early writings were attempts to heal the theological breach that existed in the early 19th century between trinitarian Congregationalists and their Unitarian counterparts). Ultimately, Bushnell's innovative theology was driven by his staunch fidelity to upholding the worldview of the homespun New England "Yankee" culture that reared him--a culture rapidly disappearing during his lifetime.

Mullin fleshes out the many paradoxes in Bushnell's thought. Bushnell valued religious experience and discussed the significance of religious miracles in ways that anticipated the later language of Pentecostalism. However, like other "old light" New England Calvinists, he castigated the emotionalism synonymous with evangelical revivalism. He was attracted to elements of Christian mysticism and fascinated with dimensions of liturgical ritual; however, he embodied the typical mid-19th-century

Protestant suspicion of the "high church" traditions of the Episcopal and Roman Catholic churches.

He extolled the belief that individuals were nurtured and loved by God, yet he castigated the women's suffrage movement, and his racism, even allowing for the standpoint of that time, remains hard to rationalize. He valued American democracy for the ways it embodied the essence of Christian community and the virtues of hard work. However, he detested the individualism and secularism of the nation's founders. He considered himself a theological descendant of a great legacy of New England Reformed theology, extending from Jonathan Edwards to Timothy Dwight, yet he found himself alienated from most of his colleagues in that tradition.

Bushnell's relationship to the rise of liberalism is also paradoxical. His emphasis on Christ's humanity and on religious experience (especially his views on Christian education) were eagerly embraced by influential liberal Protestant leaders like Theodore Munger and Washington Gladden. However, these theological heirs selectively jettisoned those aspects of Bushnell's thought that struck them as too orthodox, including his views on the atonement, God's judgment and religious miracles. As a theological pioneer, Mullin concludes, Bushnell was an explorer, not a builder. "His 'buildings' were replaced by more carefully crafted studies and treatises, but his courage of exploration would be always remembered."

Mullin's primary purpose is to present an intellectual revision of Bushnell's thought. The strength of *The Puritan as Yankee* lies in the way it challenges readers to see Bushnell in light of the larger Protestant theological controversies of his generation, as opposed to later liberal interpretations of his life. At points, however, the book cries out for more details of Bushnell's personal life--especially further discussion of his ministry at the North Congregational Church in Hartford, Connecticut, where he spent the bulk of his career. Exploring the extent to which Bushnell's pastorate shaped the contours of his theological writing might clarify his role as a theological tinkerer (this is also true of Bushnell's numerous other professional interests, which Mullin discusses only in a cursory fashion).

Mullin convincingly shows the theological discontinuity that exists between Bushnell and a later generation of liberal theologians who would revere him. Yet it is noteworthy that the majority of late 19th-century liberal Protestants, such as Gladden, shared Bushnell's fascination with a near-mythic vision of an agrarian past--a vision of a nation that valued Yankee ingenuity and hard work over all other

virtues.

It also seems significant that American Protestantism's first generation of liberal Protestant leaders was largely made up of New England clergymen like Bushnell, who formulated their theology while they served as parish ministers. Perhaps this fact alone indicates that the relationship between Bushnell's theological tinkering and the rise of late 19th-century liberalism is more organic than Mullin suggests.