

# The Mystery of Mullins in Contemporary Southern Baptist Historiography

Russell D. Moore and Gregory A. Thornbury

**Russell D. Moore** is a Ph.D. student in systematic theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary where he has served as Research Assistant to the President since 1998. His first book, *Why I Am a Baptist*, co-edited with Thomas J. Nettles, will be published by Broadman and Holman next year.

**Gregory A. Thornbury** is Instructor of Christian Studies at Union University, Jackson, Tennessee. He is co-editor of the forthcoming volume *Who Will Be Saved? The Doctrine of Salvation at Century's End* (Crossway). He has also written a chapter on A. H. Strong for the revised edition of *Baptist Theologians* (Broadman and Holman). He is a Ph.D. candidate at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

## E. Y. Mullins and the Obstinance of History

Throughout the recent theological controversies in the Southern Baptist Convention, the factions involved have claimed historical precedent as a means of fortifying their doctrinal and ecclesiastical positions. This phenomenon is natural and quite necessary. Alister McGrath observes that, "We are all condemned to live and speak in history and historical forms. Like an intellectual prison, our very historicity limits our intellectual options."<sup>1</sup> The theologian, McGrath continues, cannot elude this reality, finding "himself or herself within a tradition . . . in which the past obstinately impresses itself upon the present."<sup>2</sup> This obstinacy of history surfaces at every turn of Southern Baptist debates over the content and character of Baptist theological conviction.

If, then, tradition is unavoidable in current theological disputes among Southern Baptists, then Southern Baptist theologians must grapple with the significance of the theology of E. Y. Mullins. And they have—repeatedly, and often. We might even call such grappling with Mullins an obsession. The reason for this obsession resides in the fact that most Southern Baptist theologians recognize Mullins's defining and unparalleled role in the development of contemporary Southern Baptist theological understanding. Like it or not, we must deal with Mullins.

Historically, in addition to Southern

Baptist interest, Mullins's non-Baptist contemporaries took keen interest in his work. But the ideas that many Baptists heralded as a great theological advance instead elicited concern on the part of other evangelicals who reviewed Mullins's thought. In his review of *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression*, Princeton theologian Caspar Wistar Hodge expressed frustration at inconsistencies in Mullins's theological method. Hodge commented that Mullins's approach exhibited significant

want of clearness on . . . his view of the place of Christian experience in theology. . . . at times Dr. Mullins seems to mean only that the theologian must be a Christian and possess a Christian man's experience in order spiritually to discern and comprehend the doctrines written by revelation. Such a view we believe to be true, but scarcely to represent what might be called an "experiential method" in theology. At other times, however, Dr. Mullins speaks as if there were two sources of knowledge in Christian theology—viz., Christian experience and revelation. . . . This is a quite different position, and is an impossible one. Christian experience implicates a system of doctrine, but it does not follow that the doctrinal system can be made explicit from a study of Christian experience. . . . a knowledge of this revelation comes before experience and determines it. In fact, Dr. Mullins does not succeed in clearing up this point, and fails to give any clear or adequate view of the relation of Christian experience and Christian doctrine.<sup>3</sup>

Upon reading Mullins, Hodge immediately discovered inconsistencies in Mullins's thought, ambiguities and tensions in his method, and even outright contradictions in his theology. Hodge's "want of clearness" from Mullins highlights the internally contested nature of much of Mullins's theological program. According to Hodge, Mullins's theological epistemology is quite "an impossible one."<sup>4</sup> Hodge's critique underlined deep antinomies within Mullins's approach to theology, and presaged the controversies surrounding Mullins.

In contrast to Hodge, some Southern Baptist theologians and historians heralded Mullins's contribution to the theological task as a long overdue innovation in Baptist theological method. In contemporary Southern Baptist historiography, particularly among those who label themselves as "moderates," Mullins's contribution is often spoken of in reverent tones, as "unrivaled" in stature, and as a "genuine pioneer" in theological method.<sup>5</sup> In *The Genesis Controversy*, Ralph Elliot expressed remorse that the moderate-controlled seminaries of the 1960s and 1970s did not appeal to the precedent of Mullins's theology of revelation sooner and more candidly in the debate over Scripture in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). Such recourse, Elliot posited, "could have been used to buttress the position" of the moderate's rejection of biblical inerrancy.<sup>6</sup> Claiming Mullins, however, characterizes the endeavors by both moderates and conservatives in recent Southern Baptist historiography. Both sides frequently appear to have accepted the maxim: in matters of theological dispute, be certain to subpoena Mullins as a witness.

In the rush to claim Mullins as an ideo-

logical forbear, competing interest groups in the SBC sometimes miss the critique that Casper Wistar Hodge thought to be so obvious concerning Mullins's theology: that the foundation of Mullins's theology suffers from a serious lack of clarity and from substantive internal inconsistencies.

Nevertheless, Southern Baptist historians still look to Mullins for affirmation. As a result, the historical picture of Mullins as a theologian continues to fragment. In the current environment, Mullins functions as a sort of Feuerbachian "wish being" to which various groups pin their claims to theological legitimacy. To the conservatives, Mullins acted as a stalwart, contending for a version of bounded confessionalism and identifying himself with the early Fundamentalists. To the moderates, Mullins championed a robust individualism by making Christian experience the animating element of his doctrinal system. A recent proliferation of other perspectives abound. One thing is clear: everyone sees their own image in the mirror when they study E. Y. Mullins.

## Two Rival Historiographies

The contemporary assessment of Mullins is set in the context of two rival historiographies that reflect the theological divide in Southern Baptist life. Theologian Stan Norman has identified two distinct streams of Southern Baptist historiography: a "Reformation" stream, which understands Baptist distinctives in terms of biblical authority and a commitment to core doctrines, and an "Enlightenment" stream, which understands these distinctives in terms of Christian experience.<sup>7</sup> Norman's categorization is similar to the observation by R. Albert Mohler Jr. that the controversies in Southern Baptist life reflect a tension between two compet-

ing visions of Baptist conviction: a “Truth Party” committed to a doctrinal self-definition and a “Liberty Party” that locates Baptist identity primarily in terms of Baptist distinctives such as priesthood of believers, soul competency, and religious freedom.<sup>8</sup> Though both streams of Baptist thought seek to claim Mullins for their own, recent years have seen both sides recognize that the implications of Mullins’s thought are often too complex either for hagiography or for demonization. As the century draws to a close, neither Baptist camp has made peace with the Mullins legacy.

### Mullins and the Rebirth of Baptist Confessionalism

The Southern Baptist Convention’s monumental clash over biblical inerrancy in the 1970s and 1980s often included appeals by SBC conservatives to the Mullins legacy. Southern Baptist conservatives claimed continuity with Mullins chiefly in terms of his role as shaper of Baptist confessionalism in the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* statement. Conservatives quickly aligned themselves with the 1963 heir to that statement, even dubbing one of their early grassroots organizations the “Baptist Faith and Message Fellowship.”<sup>9</sup> They contended that the drafting committees chaired by Mullins in the 1920s and Herschel Hobbs in the 1960s explicitly upheld biblical inerrancy in the description of the Bible as “truth without any mixture of error.” Far from being a libertarian anticreedalist along the lines of the moderate SBC establishment, Mullins’s work on the denomination’s first confessional statement proved his commitment to confessional boundaries, conservatives claimed.

In recent years, however, conservative

Southern Baptists have increasingly weathered charges from moderates that their evangelical theological agenda is itself a veiled repudiation of the Mullins legacy. The lion’s share of such discussion has centered on Mullins’s successor as president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, R. Albert Mohler Jr. Moderate E. Glenn Hinson, for instance, paints Mohler as the anti-Mullins who “has taken the reins in hand to guide the institution, now under a tight Fundamentalist control, 180 degrees away from Mullins’ centering of the Baptist tradition in the voluntary principle in religion.”<sup>10</sup> Moving his critique from the seminary’s new faculty to the new letterhead, Hinson uncovers the conservative conspiracy to “blot out” the Mullins legacy even in such examples as Southern Seminary’s new logo.<sup>11</sup> Responding to Mohler’s 1997 assessment of Mullins’s theology, Russell Dilday, the moderate former president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, indicts Mohler’s interpretation of Mullins as “either a misreading of Mullins or an unfortunate distortion of his theology.”<sup>12</sup> Curtis Freeman sees a populist conservative revolt against Mullins in the recent resurgence of Reformed theology within Southern Baptist borders. Southern Baptist Calvinists, particularly those associated with the Founders Conference movement, Freeman asserts, are “committed to the etiological myth of Baptist Calvinism” and blame Mullins for a theological shift that dethroned the Reformed orthodoxy of James P. Boyce and John L. Dagg.<sup>13</sup> Jeff Pool reproves conservatives on the 1993-1994 Report of the Presidential Theological Study Committee for dishonestly using Mullins to achieve a confessional agenda. Pool charges conservatives did so “by whatever means nec-

essary (even appearing to value the comments of a theologian, when the committee actually did not value the thought of Mullins), to capture the allegiance of all Baptists in the SBC . . . by a rhetorical invocation of the highly respected name and reputation of E. Y. Mullins.”<sup>14</sup>

In certain important respects, the moderate Baptist perception of conservative unease with the Mullins legacy is accurate. Mohler, for example, argues that the very fact that both moderates and conservatives have attempted to co-opt the Mullins legacy as their own is indicative of a serious “lack of precision” in Mullins’s theology, which has “allowed variant interpretations and reconstructions of his view.”<sup>15</sup> Mohler criticizes Mullins for launching a theological method, largely derived from Friedrich Schleiermacher, which shared “a common starting point with the modernists.”<sup>16</sup> Mohler leads other conservatives in questioning implications of what is arguably the most lasting facet of the Mullins project. While acknowledging that Mullins’s formulation of soul competency helpfully emphasized the necessity of personal repentance and faith, Mohler laments that “soul competency also serves as an acid dissolving religious authority, congregationalism, confessionalism, and mutual theological accountability.”<sup>17</sup>

Moderate Baptists also rightly point to historian Tom J. Nettles as an example of conservative dissatisfaction with the Mullins legacy.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Nettles faults Mullins for a Schleiermachian experientialism, which “softened the belly of apologetics for biblical revelation.”<sup>19</sup> Nettles also holds Mullins largely responsible for steering Southern Baptists toward a more anthropocentric soteriology, which, when popularized by preachers

such as Herschel Hobbs, led to a decisive Arminianizing of Southern Baptist theology.<sup>20</sup>

Stan Norman’s approach to historiography places Mullins at odds with the conservative tradition by insisting that the Enlightenment stream of Southern Baptist thought “was birthed in Edgar Young Mullins’s *The Axioms of Religion*.”<sup>21</sup> Norman, like Mohler, pronounces Mullins’s attempt at theological balance between biblical authority and Christian experience to be a failure. “His understanding of Christian experience overshadowed his understanding of biblical authority,” Norman asserts. “Christian experience became for Mullins the core distinctive that shaped his understanding of biblical authority.”<sup>22</sup> Mullins’s project led to a Southern Baptist left-wing for whom “Christian experience replaced biblical authority as the core distinctive that interpreted the other Baptist distinctives.”<sup>23</sup>

While moderate Baptists may be correct in identifying a contemporary conservative consensus of discomfort with Mullins’s theological method, the moderates mistakenly assume this means either: (a) that conservatives have conceded the Mullins legacy to their left-leaning counterparts or (b) that conservatives have mounted a wholesale rejection of Mullins’s thought. Mohler, among others, charges moderates with selectively embracing Mullins’s theological program while distancing themselves from his conservative instincts displayed, for example, in his position as chairman of the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* committee.<sup>24</sup> In fact, many of the selections Mohler includes in his recent compilation of Mullins’s writings demonstrate that while Mullins may have been many things, he was no liberal.<sup>25</sup> Even before his inauguration as Mullins’s suc-

cessor, Mohler, then editor of *The Christian Index*, argued that self-styled moderate heirs to the Mullins legacy had completely misunderstood Mullins's own understanding of soul competency. "By 'soul competency' Mullins meant the freedom of the human soul from external coercion," Mohler contended. Mullins did not mean "its competency to deal with sin or to serve as its own religious authority."<sup>26</sup>

Mohler is not alone in articulating a conservative adoption of some aspects of Mullins's treatment of soul competency and voluntarism. Timothy George points to Mullins's statements on the need for confessional boundaries as evidence that a concern for doctrinal truth does not nullify soul competency, contrary to the arguments of some of Mullins's defenders in the moderate wing of the SBC. George notes that queasiness with confessions of faith has more in common with Alexander Campbell than E. Y. Mullins.<sup>27</sup> Paige Patterson, one of the key architects of the denomination's conservative resurgence, highlights the freedom-laden voluntaristic impulse in Southern Baptist life as that which, "while not without its liabilities, is nevertheless what makes a populist revolution possible within the SBC."<sup>28</sup> While moderates venerated Mullins for emphasizing the liberty beneath Baptist ecclesiology, Patterson and the conservatives tipped their hats as well. While moderates cheered to slogans like "Being Baptist Means Freedom," Patterson and the conservatives demonstrated that "free and faithful Baptists" of an evangelical stripe have the liberty to take on their denominational bureaucracy, and win.

Likewise, Nettles, with L. Russ Bush III, refuses to surrender Mullins to those who would promote him as the icon for a par-

tially-errant Bible. Mullins, they contend, carefully safeguarded the truthfulness and authority of the Scriptures and even answered some of the charges (such as the idea that belief in an authoritative Scripture results in "bibliolatry") made by contemporary SBC moderates.<sup>29</sup> In similar fashion, an SBC Executive Committee brochure on the inerrancy controversy included Mullins in a pantheon of Baptist greats who supported the "Bible heritage" of the resurgent conservatism of the convention leadership.<sup>30</sup>

Hence Southern Baptist conservatives face the mystery of Mullins with deeply-conflicted impulses. On the one hand, they claim him as an ambiguous but authentic ally—a "reluctant evangelical," in the words of Nettles—a stalwart in his defense of a biblically-anchored Baptist confessionalism. On the other hand, he is their most wily adversary, incubating a theological method that would nurture the Baptist liberalism they so strongly oppose.

It may be argued, however, that Mullins is not *both* ally and adversary for conservatives. Instead he is *neither*. Southern Baptist conservatives do not resonate with Mullins qua Mullins, but rather with the residual influence of confessional Baptists such as Dagg, Boyce, Broadus, and Mullins contemporary J. B. Gambrell. Similarly, Southern Baptist conservatives are not repelled by anything distinctive to Mullins, but rather by the echo of non-evangelical influences such as James, Bowne, and Schleiermacher. For conservatives, the mystery of Mullins may be that for them he is neither the problem nor the solution, but the conduit for some theological influences they cannot tolerate and some they cannot do without.

## Mullins and the Meltdown of Moderate Identity

While conservatives organized a “Baptist Faith and Message Fellowship” in the early years of the inerrancy controversy, moderates formed their own ideological interest group named, not after the confession of faith, but after its architect.<sup>31</sup> The “E. Y. Mullins Fellowship” was short-lived, but its very existence demonstrated how seriously moderates took their self-identity as his heirs. During the thick of debates over biblical authority, moderate Baptists posited the authentic Baptist theological heritage not with Dagg and Boyce, but with Mullins, A. H. Strong, and W. T. Conner.<sup>32</sup> Mullins served as a rallying point for moderates, perhaps most importantly in terms of his articulation of soul competency and the freedom of the individual to interpret Scripture. As conservatives gained ground on trustee boards across the convention, for instance, moderates accelerated talk of “soul competency” and “the priesthood of the believer” in their attempt to keep denominational employees and professors from being held accountable to the confessional guidelines of the institutions they served.<sup>33</sup>

Like that of the conservatives, however, the moderate conscription of Mullins is showing signs of strain. The older generation of Baptist moderates largely cling tenaciously to what they claim as Mullins’s legacy of soul competency and personal voluntarism, articulated in often starkly individualistic terms. An emerging communitarian strain within the Baptist left, seen most clearly in the Baptist Manifesto (or “Baptifesto”) statement of 1997,<sup>34</sup> brought with it a willingness by some moderates to reexamine Mullins’s place at the table.

“Self-proclaimed moderates were not

entirely without reason in memorializing Mullins as the minister who had best explained Baptists to themselves,” H. Clark Maddux observes.<sup>35</sup> The Mullins project has proven to be more than political “spin control” for the denominational moderates. Many articulate a self-consciousness in which their interpretation of Mullins’s soul competency is non-negotiable both for forging Baptist identity and for evaluating alternative theologies.<sup>36</sup> Glenn Hinson posits the voluntary principle as articulated by Mullins as at “the heart of the Baptist tradition.”<sup>37</sup> More emphatically, Hinson writes that Mullins’s principle of soul competency “is critical not merely to the churches but to humankind.”<sup>38</sup>

This libertarian interpretation of Mullins’s theology of voluntarism resides at the heart of the moderate Baptists’ dissent against what they called a “takeover” of the denomination. The Alliance of Baptists, a liberal splinter group organized in 1987, summarizes its self-identity in terms of the freedom of the individual, the freedom of the local congregation, and the freedom of the larger body of Christ.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, a call to such freedom, often presented as part of the Mullins heritage, stood at the forefront of almost every moderate Baptist endeavor, from the initial conflagration of the controversy to the current pronouncements of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the shadow denomination formed in the 1990s to rival the “taken over” SBC.

These traditional or “paleo”-moderates’ individualistic reading of Mullins surfaces, for instance, in the intensity with which James Dunn stresses the “I” at the center of our being even Almighty God will not trample.<sup>40</sup> For him, such theologically expressed individualism is at

the core of Baptist identity. Dunn's anti-confessional reading of the Baptist heritage leads him to assert that the only thing resembling a creed for genuine Baptists is: "Ain't nobody but Jesus going to tell me what to believe."<sup>41</sup> Agreeing with fellow moderates Grady Cothen, Bill J. Leonard, and Leon McBeth that Mullins's soul competency concept is a self-evident truth that needs no proof, Dunn points to the doctrine as the obvious foundation for his church/state separation activism as head of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs in the 1980s and 1990s. Similarly, theologian Molly T. Marshall ties Mullins's emphasis on soul freedom to the authority of the individual to interpret the text, an authority she believes means the individual should "interrogate" texts that seem to foster sexism, violence, or oppression.<sup>42</sup>

Jeff Pool rejects as encroaching "credoism" confessional statements that do not arise "from the basic Baptist principle" he sees in the *Baptist Faith and Message*: "Every human finally stands invited and able to respond finally and only to the loving and beckoning triune God."<sup>43</sup> Pool's radically individualistic understanding of Baptist confessionalism leads him to equate Southwestern Seminary's refusal to publish a collage of moderate interpretations of the *Baptist Faith and Message* with Roman Catholic adherence to the magisterium of the church.<sup>44</sup> It is not difficult to see how the moderates' exaltation of murkily-defined doctrines of soul competency and the voluntary principle could leave conservatives wondering if, and on what grounds, such a view could allow a Baptist church to refuse membership to a unitarian or a state convention to refuse to seat messengers from a white supremacist church. Even secular journalist Kenneth Woodward reported

that the libertarian moderate interpretation of Mullins's doctrine of soul competency was responsible for the silence of the Baptist left in the face of President Bill Clinton's 1998 sex and perjury scandal.<sup>45</sup>

While some paleo-moderates have sought to modify slightly their reading of Mullins,<sup>46</sup> they have maintained that a commitment to individual autonomy is essential to the Baptist distinctive of soul liberty. Walter Shurden, for instance, rejects criticisms that Mullins's view of soul competency was indicative of a "hyper-individualism that undercuts church life," but he upholds the view that individualism is an essential component of Baptist life since "discipleship begins with an awareness of God that is intensely personal, private, and uncoerced, allowing no proxies, and where each individual is accountable to God."<sup>47</sup> Against those who contend that this experience arises from the community of faith, Shurden posits the individual's experience as "where the church, according to Baptists, is born."<sup>48</sup> Thus Shurden stands firm in his insistence that "the one word that comes closer than any other to capturing the historic Baptist identity is the word 'freedom.'"<sup>49</sup>

It is precisely at this point that Mullins becomes a mystery among the moderates. The individualistic libertarian interpretation of Mullins is no longer monolithic within the "Liberty Party" stream of Baptist historiography. Strongly influenced by the emphasis on community in the writings of postmodern theologians such as James McClendon, Stanley Hauerwas, and Stanley Grenz, a newer group within the Baptist left has called for a reassessment of Mullins from within moderate ranks. These, the rebellious children of Mullins, see their elder siblings as naive in their adoration of Mullins's ideology.

The “Baptifesto” signatories oppose both the confessional orthodoxy of the conservatives and the paleo-moderate view of freedom, which the newer group sees as more a cultural by-product of modern democratic society than as an integral part of Baptist identity. The communitarians, in a less than subtle swipe at Mullins himself, advocated “following Jesus as a call to shared discipleship rather than invoking a theory of soul competency.”<sup>50</sup> Even the “Baptifesto” plank on religious liberty flows from an understanding of the community as a colony of heaven rather than from any doctrine of soul liberty. The “Baptifesto” signatories directly challenged Mullins as one who “embraced modernity by defining freedom in terms of the Enlightenment notions of autonomous moral agency and objective rationality.”<sup>51</sup> The document lumped Mullins in with what it pronounced the equally rationalistic orthodoxy of Princeton theology and *The Fundamentals*. Since Mullins was a contributor to *The Fundamentals*, the “Baptifesto” managed to repudiate simultaneously both conservative and liberal vehicles for Mullins hagiography. The response to the “Baptifesto” statement from readers of the moderate news periodical *Baptists Today* reflected the shock with which many on the Baptist left viewed this distancing from Mullins. “It is nonsense to suggest that E. Y. Mullins led us down the path to selfish individualism,” retorted one reader in a stinging critical letter to the editor.<sup>52</sup>

Since the publishing of the “Baptifesto,” communitarian moderates have pulled even fewer punches in their reassessment of Mullins. Startlingly, Curtis Freeman, a key crafter of the manifesto, agrees with Harold Bloom that Mullins’s

principle of soul competency is a revival of ancient gnosticism since Mullins’s dichotomous anthropology meant that “the ‘soul’ in soul competency is disembodied.”<sup>53</sup> Freeman takes on paleo-moderates such as James Dunn on their own ground, suggesting that “Mullins no doubt would recoil” from their confessionally-tepid libertarianism.<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, he faults Mullins with breeding such error by failing to “delineate the qualities of a character that would constitute competency: the habits and skills which a competent soul would need to possess in order to read the Bible wisely” along with “the sort of community and spiritual formation that are necessary to initiate and sustain converted souls in the Christian life.”<sup>55</sup> In an assessment harsher than any offered by Southern Baptist conservatives, Freeman suggests “what Mullins invented was the myth of soul competency,” which served libertarian moderates as “a metanarrative that supported the revisionism of the past which had located the roots of soul competency in earlier Baptist and primitive Christian soil, much as the myth of ‘the trail of blood’ guided Landmarkers in their reading of the history of Christianity.”<sup>56</sup> Mullins’s myth has been harmful, Freeman contends, because it provides no basis for ecclesiology and stifles socio-political engagement.

While it may appear that Freeman and his fellow communitarians have managed completely to free themselves from Mullins, such is not the case. For all their criticism, the “Baptifesto” moderates too see Mullins as an incipient spokesman for their ideology. Freeman, for instance, argues that Mullins used soul competency and other keystones of his theological system as “navigational tools” by which he “steered the Southern Baptist ship around

the rocky waters of fundamentalism and past the swirling currents of liberalism.”<sup>57</sup> Mullins, like a good postmodernist, “perceived that although theological liberals (e.g., Schleiermacher, Clarke, Mathews, and Fosdick) and conservatives (e.g., Hodge, Dagg, and Boyce) traveled different routes they were on the same voyage.”<sup>58</sup> Right in line with the postmodern thinkers of the present era, Mullins saw the same Enlightenment philosophical foundationalism behind both fundamentalism and liberalism, Freeman asserts.

Similarly, Timothy Maddox argues that in Mullins’s thought “is not simply a *modern* project but a complex restatement of Baptists that can easily be seen as proto-postmodern in nature.”<sup>59</sup> Indeed, Maddox contends, both libertarian and communitarian moderates can claim this “proto-postmodern” Mullins as their own. After all, the intent of Mullins’s theology, he claims, was to “help form the community” since *The Axioms of Religion* served to unite the Baptist community worldwide.<sup>60</sup> Once Maddox broaches the possibility of a postmodern Mullins, he almost giddily finds Mullins’s thought chock full of postmodernism. “Looking closer at Mullins one finds the very postmodern themes of situatedness, hermeneutics, tradition, and community,” Maddox concludes. “He represents notions that have always been held by Baptists but have often been repressed within the *modern* world.”<sup>61</sup> Maddox goes so far as to describe Mullins’s view of the self as “surprisingly similar” to that of postmodernist Paul Ricoeur<sup>62</sup> and Mullins’s theological method as “in line” with that of David Tracy. Such an anachronistic reading of Mullins surely opens a world of disconcerting possibilities for the next generation of revisionist Mullins

scholars. One can almost anticipate the arguments for Mullins as eco-feminist, animal liberationist, or queer theorist.

An early twentieth-century theologian functions as the key arena for the continuing crisis of Baptist identity among moderates who cannot yet decide whether their defining value is liberty or community, whether to argue as enlightened modernists or trendy postmodernists, or even whether to call themselves “Baptists” or “baptists.” Moderates still largely claim Mullins as their theological forbear, but he is beginning to force them to think through the implications of a theology based largely on the experience of the individual and the competency of the soul. For moderates, as for conservatives, Mullins may be a mystery, but he is not going away.

### **The Mystery of Mullins and Theological Method**

As we have demonstrated in the sections above, every Southern Baptist scholar, or so it seems, holds a strong opinion regarding the importance of Mullins’s theology. In Mullins’s thought, persons see individual elements with which they either strongly resonate or dissent. Consequently, even though most persons want to lay claim to at least some portion of the Mullins’s legacy, no one achieves consensus by looking to Mullins’s thought. Mullins’s scholars across the ideological divide either applaud or eschew the substantive intellectual streams that composed Mullins’s thought. But inasmuch as Mullins’s theology both rallies and polarizes, its inquirers are never able to determine how all these streams cohere into one overarching theological method.

The simple answer to the above

dilemma stems from the acknowledgement that the disparate elements of Mullins's theology do not terminate in a systematic theological method. This conclusion explains the multi-faceted interpretations of Mullins's theological method in contemporary Southern Baptist historiography. As soon as one appropriator of Mullins suggests an integrating theological motif, another Mullins observer counters with an equally important but contradictory theological principle found imbedded in Mullins's work. One cannot merely say, as is often assumed, that Mullins's method emanates from experience, without qualifying what experience precisely means in Mullins's determination. Such persistent and repeated internal confusion within Mullins's system precipitated Casper Wistar Hodge's critique highlighted above that Mullins's *Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression* contained mutually exclusive claims to authority.<sup>63</sup> In any case, Hodge observed, Mullins's theology possessed no thoroughgoing methodological principle, his resulting method is quite "impossible." For his part, Mullins resisted having his views easily categorized or labeled. Once when questioned by an eager fundamentalist concerning his position on evolution and particularly whether he affirmed the special, direct creation of Adam, Mullins retorted that "some of you brethren who train with the radical fundamentalists are going over on Catholic ground and leaving the Baptist position. . . . A man who tries to pin his brethren down to stereotyped statements, such as your letter contains, has missed the Baptist spirit."<sup>64</sup> Unfortunately, Mullins's theological method is not coherent.

This conclusion need not lessen our recognition of the sheer intellectual

achievement of Mullins's work. E. Y. Mullins towered over many of his peers as one of the most intellectually and culturally aware theologians of his age. Mullins was an ideological superconductor, appropriating the leading ideas of the most influential philosophical movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He digested with critical ability the writings of philosophers and theologians such as Schleiermacher, James, Bowne, Harnack, Newman and Schweitzer. Mullins's *Freedom and Authority in Religion*, for example, demonstrates his considerable facility with the theological currents of his age.<sup>65</sup> Mullins earned his well-deserved scholarly reputation.

Notwithstanding Mullins's renowned substantive scholarly acumen, however, few scholars acknowledge that Mullins never forged these individual intellectual influences into a rigorous theological method. While "Christian experience" comprises the common refrain from those asked to summarize Mullins's theological method, his use of that category fails to explain adequately his entire system, as a careful reading of *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression* reveals. This phenomenon distinguished Mullins from other modern theologians, whose methods affected every doctrine within the system (e.g., Schleiermacher's feeling of absolute dependence, Barth's infinite qualitative distinction between time and eternity, Tillich's existential method of correlation, et al.).<sup>66</sup> Mullins's appeal to Christian experience fails to provide the same quality of explanatory power as do comparable theological methods. As Hodge indicated in his review of *The Christian Religion*, Mullins never offered a clear word regarding the nature of Christian experience *vis à vis* the doctrine of

revelation.

Instead of doggedly advancing a thoroughgoing method, Mullins experimented with an array of distinct theological epistemologies within *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression*. A few examples will suffice. In Chapter One, Section Two (I/2), and Chapter Four, Sections Two and Four (IV/2, 4), we see the pragmatic and relativizing influence of William James from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In Chapters (I/4) and (IV/3, 7), Mullins incorporated the insights of Boston Personalism. In Chapters Four and Ten, he contended with contemporary questions regarding the relationship between science and religion, and concluded that theological conclusions derive from empirically justifiable propositions. As a result, these separate, sometimes conflicting, but extremely influential sources for theology help explain Mullins's rather unconventional organization of the remaining theological common places in his systematic theology.<sup>67</sup> In the preface to *The Christian Religion*, Mullins acknowledges his reticence to adopt theological systematization. He explains that whereas Reformation and post-Reformation theologies "were comprehensive, more or less philosophical treatises," and exhibited "a very commendable desire to systematize the truths of Christianity," these approaches "too often [sacrificed] the biblical method and aim in the interest of a 'school' of theology or a philosophical principle."<sup>68</sup> Thus, Mullins endeavored to "discard" such systems and "adhere . . . more closely . . . to the Scriptures."<sup>69</sup>

Despite Mullins's self-estimation of his own approach, reviewers of his thought fail to view him as primarily a biblical theologian, but rather as a theologian who

made peace with modernity. This picture of Mullins possesses tremendous explanatory power. When assessing Mullins, one finds it difficult to speak of his thought apart from some other more seminal thinker or movement such as Schleiermacher, James, Personalism, or Boyce.<sup>70</sup> The literature on Mullins repeatedly bears out this observation. In *The Shaping of American Religion*, for example, Sydney Ahlstrom commended Mullins as "the supreme Baptist theologian" given his attempt to "intellectualize the old-time religion of the 19<sup>th</sup> century evangelism."<sup>71</sup> Ahlstrom viewed Mullins's attempt as quite noble, of course, given the limitations of the very task of intellectually rehabilitating the revivalist tradition. He considered Mullins to be the bright and dutiful son of revivalism, but not the pioneer of a new theological movement. Given the substantive amount of attention given to his thought in recent years, we most accurately view Mullins as a sort of "retro-fitter" in his tradition, updating a tradition that he inherited with the novel resources of modernity. In the midst of his extensive rehabilitation projects, unfortunately, we lose confidence that all of these "updates" cohered in any systemic sense of the word.

If appropriators of Mullins see themselves in the mirror as they study his work, it is due to the fact that Mullins's thought itself was largely a mirror of his times and culture. The parties within the SBC that contend with each other over Mullins, disagree not so much over particular doctrines or positions Mullins held as they do over agreement as to the center of his thought. To the one frustrated by the lack of consensus on the Mullins's legacy, take heart. The frustration is as old as the twentieth century itself.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Alister McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 81.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Casper W. Hodge, "Recent Literature: The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression," *The Princeton Theological Review* 16 (1918) 125-126.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., 125.
- <sup>5</sup> Dwight A. Moody, "The Bible" in *Has Our Theology Changed?*, ed. Paul A. Basden (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994) 9, 34. See also other chapters in this volume for more examples of this kind of assessment of Mullins.
- <sup>6</sup> Ralph H. Elliot, *The "Genesis Controversy" and Continuity in Southern Baptist Chaos: A Eulogy for a Great Tradition* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1992) 19.
- <sup>7</sup> Stan Norman, "Fighting the Good Fight: The Struggle for a Baptist Identity" *SBC Life*, April 1999, 8-9.
- <sup>8</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., "A Call for Baptist Evangelicals and Evangelical Baptists: Communities of Faith and a Common Quest for Identity" in *Southern Baptists and American Evangelicals*, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1993) 227-228.
- <sup>9</sup> James C. Hefley, *The Truth in Crisis: The Controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Dallas: Criterion Publications, 1986) 1:58-62.
- <sup>10</sup> E. Glenn Hinson, "E. Y. Mullins as Interpreter of the Baptist Tradition," *Review and Expositor* 96 (Winter 1999) 119.
- <sup>11</sup> "Until [Mohler] became president, the Seminary's logo was an open Bible with a dove hovering over it," Hinson writes. "Now the logo is a shield with a cross within which is a much tinier open Bible with a dove hovering over it. Shades of the medieval crusades!" Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Russell Dilday, "Mullins the Theologian: Between the Extremes," *Review and Expositor* 96 (Winter 1997) 79. Moderate Timothy Maddox agrees with Dilday that Mohler's introduction to the 1997 volume on Mullins was "unfortunate" and a "misreading" of Mullins. See Timothy D. F. Maddox, "E. Y. Mullins: Mr. Baptist for the 20th and 21st Century," *Review and Expositor* 96 (Winter 1999) 103 n. 11.
- <sup>13</sup> Curtis W. Freeman, "E. Y. Mullins and the Siren Songs of Modernity," *Review and Expositor* 96 (Winter 1999) 33. It is important to note that Freeman considers such observations to be without historical foundation. "That Mullins is indicative of the adjustment of Baptist theology to modernity is surely correct," he notes. "That he is the cause or source of this shift is less likely."
- <sup>14</sup> Jeff Pool, *Against Returning to Egypt: Exposing and Resisting Credentialism in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998) 100-101. Pool cites as evidence of the "objectionable evaluation of Mullins" by quoting a 1995 quote by Mohler describing Mullins as "the pivotal figure" who "paved the way for true liberalism to enter the SBC."
- <sup>15</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr. "Introduction," in *The Axioms of Religion*, ed. Timothy and Denise George (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997) 13.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., 9-10.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., 26.
- <sup>18</sup> H. Clark Maddux, for example, cites Nettles as one of Mullins's "severest and ablest critics" although he finds Nettles's analysis "necessarily limited" by its sesquicentennial scope. "Edgar Young Mullins and Evangelical Developments in the Southern Baptist Convention," *Baptist History and Heritage* 33 (Spring 1998) 62.
- <sup>19</sup> Tom J. Nettles, "The Rise and Demise of Calvinism Among Southern Baptists," *Founders Journal* 19/20 (Winter/Spring 1995) 16.
- <sup>20</sup> Tom J. Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986) 246-257. Mark T. Coppenger puts forth a similar assessment of Mullins's role in the shift in Southern Baptist theology. Remarkably, Coppenger cites a passage from Mullins's preaching as "seemingly at odds with the anthropological article of the *Abstract of Principles*." Coppenger, "The Ascent of Lost Man in Southern Baptist Preaching," *Founders Journal* 25 (Summer 1996) 12.
- <sup>21</sup> Norman, 9.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Mohler, "Introduction," 24.
- <sup>25</sup> The volume includes, for instance, Mullins's defense of confessionalism in his essay "Baptists and Creeds" and his conservative critique of modernist scholarship in "The Jesus of 'Liberal' Theology." Timothy and Denise George, ed., *The Axioms of Religion*.
- <sup>26</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., "Soul Competency: Getting the Baptist Story Straight," *Christian Index*, 13 May 1993, 2. In this article, Mohler con-

trasts Mullins's view of soul competency with the characterization of his view given by liberal Baptists such as television journalist Bill Moyers and finds in the revisionist model "precisely the competency Mullins rejected."

<sup>27</sup>Timothy George, "Southern Baptist Ghosts," *First Things*, May 1999, 20-21.

<sup>28</sup>Paige Patterson, "Anatomy of a Reformation: The Southern Baptist Convention 1978-1994," *Faith and Mission* 16 (Summer 1999) 25.

<sup>29</sup>L. Russ Bush and Tom J. Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible*, revised and expanded edition (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999) 258-269.

<sup>30</sup>"We Thought You'd Like to Know," May 1993 (Convention Relations Department of the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention). The brochure cites Mullins's address to the 1923 Southern Baptist Convention supporting confessional requirements for faculty members at Baptist schools. Mullins's quote is included alongside others such as John L. Dagg, James P. Boyce, B. H. Carroll, and Lottie Moon. Interestingly, this brochure also highlights Mullins's doctrine of soul competency, describing it as "the accountability of each person before God. Your family cannot save you. Neither can your church. It comes down to you and God. Authorities can't force belief or unbelief. They shouldn't try."

<sup>31</sup>H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987) 682.

<sup>32</sup>See, for instance, moderate Cecil

Sherman's use of Mullins in his significant debate with conservative Paige Patterson at Morgantown, North Carolina. *SBC Battle for the Bible Debate: Does the Bible contain errors?*, audiotape of debate between Paige Patterson and Cecil Sherman (Dallas: Criswell Bible Institute, 1982).

<sup>33</sup>Such arguments continue in, for example, E. Glenn Hinson, "The Voluntary Principle in Baptist Life," *Whitsitt Journal* 6 (Spring 1999) 12-13. Hinson does so without explaining why Mullins himself supported confessional guidelines for faculty members at Baptist educational institutions if doing so endangers Mullins's legacy of the voluntary principle.

<sup>34</sup>"Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America," *Baptists Today*, 26 June 1997, 8-10. Drafters of this document include James William McClendon Jr., and Curtis Freeman. Signatories include Nancy Ammerman, Carey Newman, Roger Olson, and Stanley Grenz.

<sup>35</sup>Maddux, 62.

<sup>36</sup>A. J. Conyers, for instance, assesses the revival of Reformed theology among Southern Baptists with the warning that "[a] theology of this type must accommodate the Baptist conviction that (to use Mullins's term) the soul is 'competent' to respond to God's gift of himself in Jesus Christ." A. J. Conyers, "The Changing Face of Baptist Theology," *Review and Expositor* 95 (Summer 1998) 28.

<sup>37</sup>Hinson, "The Voluntary Principle in Baptist Life," 1.

<sup>38</sup>Hinson, "E. Y. Mullins as Interpreter of the Baptist Tradition," 116.

<sup>39</sup>"The Covenant of the Alliance of Baptists," in Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 1993) 85-86.

<sup>40</sup>James M. Dunn, "Yes, I Am a Baptist," in *Why I Am a Baptist: Reflections on Being Baptist in the 21st Century*, ed. Cecil P. Staton Jr. (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 1999) 46.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 47.

<sup>42</sup>Molly T. Marshall, "Exercising Liberty of Conscience: Freedom in Private Interpretation," in *Baptists in the Balance: The Tension Between Freedom and Responsibility*, ed. Everett C. Goodwin (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1997) 147.

<sup>43</sup>Jeff Pool, "Chief Article of Faith: The Preamble of *The Baptist Faith and Message* (1963)," in *Sacred Mandates of Conscience: Interpretations of the Baptist Faith and Message*, ed. Jeff B. Pool (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 1997) 77.

<sup>44</sup>Jeff Pool, "Conscience and Interpreting Baptist Tradition," in *Sacred Mandates of Conscience*, 17. "If [Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary President Kenneth] Hemphill and his administration genuinely trusted and expressed the SBC's historic perspectives, they would allow Baptists to read, to discuss, to argue, if need be to complain and finally to decide for themselves how they will evaluate interpretations of the BFM (1963)," Pool writes. "Instead, the administrators of SWBTS have decided not to allow Baptists in the SBC to exer-

cise their prerogatives as participants in a common priesthood. Neither such a repressive posture nor such manipulative behavior represents the broader and most authentic heritage and piety of Baptists in the SBC.”

<sup>45</sup>Kenneth Woodward, “Sex, Sin and Salvation,” *Newsweek*, 2 November 1998, 37.

<sup>46</sup>See, for instance, Hinson’s suggestion that contemporary moderates abandon Mullins’s emphasis on denominationalism and revise his individualism. Hinson, “Interpreter of the Baptist Tradition,” 118–119.

<sup>47</sup>Walter Shurden, “The Baptist Identity and The Baptist Manifesto,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 25 (Winter 1998) 331.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Shurden, 55.

<sup>50</sup>“Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity,” 8.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 9.

<sup>52</sup>Patrick N. Rogers-Horn, “Numerous Difficulties,” letter to the editor, *Baptists Today*, 21 August 1997, 10.

<sup>53</sup>Freeman, 36.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 35.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>59</sup>Maddox, 97.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 94–95.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 98.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Hodge, 125.

<sup>64</sup>E. Y. Mullins, letter to the editor, in the Fort Worth *Searchlight*, April 16, 1926, quoted in Kenneth K. Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964) 63.

<sup>65</sup>E. Y. Mullins, *Freedom and Authority in Religion* (Philadelphia: The Griffith and Rowland Press, 1913).

<sup>66</sup>Mullins’s lack of a penetrating methodological principle cannot be said to exist as a peculiarly Baptist phenomenon, since examples can be multiplied to the contrary (e.g., A. H. Strong’s emphasis on ethical monism, and Stanley Grenz’s communitarianism based on the doctrine of the Trinity).

<sup>67</sup>In view here, for example, is Mullins’s placement of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit before the doctrines of God the Father, Creation and the work of Christ, as well his separation of the sections concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ. Although Mullins avers that his rationale for doing so stems from the fact that we only obtain the knowledge of God through redemption, his novel conceptualization of the order of theological subjects remains nonetheless striking. See E. Y. Mullins, *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression* (Nashville: The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1917) 214.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., vii.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., vii.

<sup>70</sup>Every contribution to Baptist thought attributed to Mullins appears beholden to some earlier, more fundamental perspective or event. For instance, Southern Baptists rightly cheer Mullins for his pivotal role in developing and gaining denominational acceptance of *The Baptist Faith and Message* as a confession of faith. But rarely acknowledged is the likelihood that

the Northern Baptist Convention’s rejection of the New Hampshire Confession of Faith in 1922 energized Mullins’s push for a confession of faith in the South in 1925. Mullins participated in the program at the 1922 Northern Baptist Convention on the day that Cornelius Woelfkin’s clever appeal to “the New Testament alone as our creed” helped defeat W. B. Riley’s motion for Northern Baptists to adopt the New Hampshire Confession of Faith as a doctrinal standard for its institutions and agencies. Perhaps Mullins’s support of a slightly reworded New Hampshire Confession in 1925 came from a desire to see Southern Baptists avoid the bitter dispute which eventually tore their northern counterparts in two. For a detailed account of the proceedings of the 1922 Northern Baptist Convention at Indianapolis, see *The Watchman Examiner*, July 6, 1922.

<sup>71</sup>Sydney Ahlstrom, “Theology in America: A Historical Survey,” in *The Shaping of American Religion*, Vol. 1 (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961) 303.