

Modernism, God, and Church in the Thinking of J. Macbride Sterrett

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Abstract

Modernism was a movement that impacted the church. In spite of the fact that many modernists wrote against the church, there were some, such as J. Macbride Sterrett, who not only defended the church, but also integrated modernist principles into their perspectives on what the church should be. Sterrett was also a clergyman in the Protestant Episcopal Church, which offered a deeper meaning to his modernist thought. This paper presents the main ideas in relation to history, church and society. His perspectives defend the identity of the church and its use in modern society. Sterrett's ideas are useful also because they present a purpose for the church, that is quite easy to understand for the secular environment.

Keywords: Modernism, God, and Church in the Thinking of J. Macbride Sterrett

Introduction

In the first quarter of the XXth century religious modernism was going through a development that consisted in adapting to the idea of the transcendent and the church. Modernism entered the sphere of the religious and of the clergy. Such is the case of J. Macbride Sterrett (1847-1923), a philosopher and a clergyman within the Protestant Episcopal Church. He argued in favor of modernism, but of a highly religious kind. He argued in favor of God, Christ and the church, but he criticized all that he considered outdated or outworn, because he believed that the church should speak the language of the people and of the age. Old structures of dogma should be laid aside, while those that answer the specific needs of society should be put in place. Modernism was explained by Sterrett not as an enemy of the church, but as an aid to make the church easy to understand for those who want to be part of it, or are already members. The point of his argument is that modernity can serve a noble purpose in the developing plan of God and for the improvement of society.

Modernism: the harmony of old and new

In J. Macbride Sterrett defines the modernist as 'a man of modern culture, embracing, as it does, a knowledge and an appreciation of the cultures of other ages and religions' (Macbride Sterrett, 1922, p. 1). Modernism, as a movement, is a religious one, but 'on its intellectual side it is an attempt at a synthesis between the new learning and the old religion' (Macbride Sterrett, 1922, p. 1). From these two definitions, one can understand that in spite of it being a new movement within society, modernism, or part of it, is a return to the values of the past and an adaptation of their contents to the new age, but not with the intent purpose of destroying the heritage, but to add value to it. A modernist will look with grateful eyes to the past, and he will use it in order to shape the present and the pass an even greater heritage on to the following generation.

After these two short definitions, Sterrett presents the modernist as 'one who recognizes that he is heir of all ages, but feels and knows that he ought to be slave of none' (Macbride Sterrett, 1922, p. 20). This is an important aspect and it requires a further analysis. Sterrett argues in favor of a universal man, one who is educated and well versed in the art of interpreting history. He is neither a historian, nor does he have any other humanist preparation. However, he could be a historian, as well as a man of letters. Of crucial importance is that a modernist knows one's history and is informed to such an extent that one develops a remarkable capacity to detach from any emotional selection, in favor of a rational adherence to all good principles, of any epoch. The genuine modernist should not escape one's fate. It is not an inescapable fate, written somewhere in the stars, but it is a fate of knowledge. Once one understands and adheres to what Sterrett defines as modernism, the recognition of the heritage of all ages becomes a *status quo*. The genuine modernist will not even try to escape such a natural conclusion. Thus, one's dedication will be wholly given to the pursuit of the modernist agenda: a

thorough knowledge of the past and a developed capacity of selecting value. The modernist will not stay locked in the past, rather one will take the heritage of the past and project it to construct a future that begins with the present. History and all that makes up the past is a tool that is used to create quality, value, and good. Being the heir of all ages, but slave to none, places the modernist outside any chronological delimitation. A modernist is not one who lived within a certain time period, but one who transcends such limitations, by the fact that one who lives whenever could consider all the ages before as a heritage.

Sterrett uses a harsh word: 'slave', and this implies a limitation of freedom(s), of rights, of movements, and a denial of opinion and value. Time can create, apparently, slaves, but it is not time's fault, but rather man's fault. One might grow to attached to a certain period of history, and militate for its absolute superiority in comparison to any other historical period. Such 'slaves' cannot develop a functional critical method, which would allow for an effective selection of value over form/shape. The slave of a historical period will mask the evils of that time, and even develop lies simply to promote a positive image of an enamored period. The modernist and the slave are radically opposed. While the modernist will develop one's critical apparatus, the period slave will sink into mediocrity or worse. The capacity to select principles that are worth pursuing and developing is crucial for the healthy social development of any culture. In fact, being able to discern between what advances society and what hinders it, makes the difference between freedom and oppression.

These views were not known to Godrycz, who, in his treatise against late XIXth century modernism, argued that the philosophical perspective it is built upon is positivism, which had little tolerance for theology. Christianity was considered a rather social event, with no scientific criteria that would validate it in the field of proper science. Thus, Christianity was little more than human sentiment. However, Godrycz argues in favor of a scientifically provable God. He starts from the fact that modernist positivism acknowledges that 'human reason is capable of detecting the laws governing material phenomena and of establishing scientific principle' (Godrycz, 1908, pp. 7–8). He also argues that what science calls *phenomena* make up nature. The discovered phenomena and the laws of nature must have come from somewhere. He concludes that due to the 'harmony, the order, the finality, the design in all these phenomena, we are compelled to look upon them as the work of a supreme intelligence' (Godrycz, 1908, pp. 9–10). Therefore, argues Godrycz, whenever one refers to a scientific law, one presents the case of *concursum divinum*, or the regulating agency of God (Godrycz, 1908, p.10). Sterrett had been working on the ideas that he published as a book in 1922, for well over a decade. The dialogue between Sterrett and Godrycz would have been quite interesting, especially because Sterrett argued in favor of a religious and God-believing modernist.

Criticism: the benefits for the church

In the Preface of his book, Sterrett argues in favor of criticism, but not a destructive one. Criticism is fundamental for development and progress. It evaluates and points out the positives and the negatives. In Sterrett's perspective modernists are critics that try to adapt the old to the new, also in the field of religion. After acknowledging that the old grows slower, and radicalism is the reaction to the old, Sterrett makes the remark that the later without the former would only lead to useless destruction. In Sterrett's moral perspective a matricide, for example, is just as condemnable as it ever was. Any kind of moral injustice should have its proper definition, as well as its correct punishment. He does not argue in favor of reevaluating morals and the moral standards. However, if a modernist – or anyone – criticizes the church in an honest manner, it is not wrong, but necessary. Sterrett admits he was a conservative apologist and a critic of all new developments of theology – higher criticism, for example – but came to understand what modernism preached, and gradually became one himself. However, he did not shed the religious skin, rather he adapted the old to the new. He was a clergyman within the Protestant Episcopal Church, and from this position argued in favor of honest search for God and for the correct definition of the church, in light of old ecclesiastical and theological perspectives. Honest seeker of the truth within the church are bound to clash with other members of the congregation. Sterrett does not argue in favor of peace for peace's sake, but for a steadfast dialogue, even with the cost of creating discomfort for some. The truth of God and the maternity of the church are well worth the effort, in his opinion (Macbride Sterrett, 1922, pp. x, xi).

Paul Sabatier writes in his book *Modernism, The Jowett Lectures, 1908*, that modernism developed historical criticism. This aspect creates a problem for Christian theology, because it argues that history and science do not deal with anything that is not human. Faith, therefore, because it transfigured the historical person of Christ, must be removed because it turned him above the historical condition of man. Also, faith created an image in which the deed and words of Christ, were above his character, condition and education. The point of modernist criticism is that Jesus Christ must be seen as a

human, and nothing more. This thesis is unacceptable to Sabatier (Sabatier, 1908, pp. 244–245). Sterrett, on the other hand, does argue in favor of a historically accurate depiction of Christ, but without annulling the existence of God and the supernatural.

The application of Sterrett's principle is done by comparing the heritage received by a child from his father and grandfather, while growing up, to the time the child becomes an adult and has to decide what to do with the heritage he received. One of the options is to lock the heritage away and never bother with it. This would create the necessity to innovate in order to function. However, one cannot innovate from nothing all the time. The second option is to take the heritage, acknowledge it and use it in creative ways in order to adapt it to modern necessities. This option requires innovation, not out of nothing, but out of a pre-existing material. It places less strain on the effort to adapt, and it offers more freedom to organize free-time around important parts of one's life, perhaps family and/or hobbies. The main aspect that Sterrett underlines is that such a contextualized heritage will be passed on in a developed and improved way to the next generations (Macbride Sterrett, 1922, p. 20).

Another comparison offered by Sterrett is that of a modernist who finds oneself in an old church building. He has a number of options, but Sterrett argues that a genuine modernist will choose to reform, rather than destroy the heritage-filled church. A church building does not belong to a single generation, but it is a universal symbol of peace, unity and good-will. If the piety of generations long gone and the historical events associated with the building and the people who worshiped in it, together with the whole religious nature that had permeated into society, can be seen and understood as integral parts of one's own identity, then the entire construct, the whole historical context receives a new purpose. Due to ignorance, the purpose and heritage of anything can be forever lost. However, an informed man – whom Sterrett calls 'wise' – will strive for the better and for the promotion of one's neighbor (Macbride Sterrett, 1922, p. 22).

The modernist and the historical heritage

The heritage of Christianity and the adaptation to the new age, has created tension in the dialogue between the church and science. It is most unfair to argue the image of the church as an anti-science institution. Just as modernism criticized religion and the church, the church found the voice to criticize modernism. In his extended letter, Cardinal Mercier, addresses the issue of the science and the church. He condemns modernism, but not science. One of his arguments is that modernism is not the modern expression of science. This is due to the fact that science, in itself, is not condemnable, nor are its methods. He acknowledges the Catholic scientists who strive for the improvement in this field. However, his criticism is aimed at the thesis of modernism which holds that the 'religious soul must draw from itself, from nothing but itself, the object and motive of its faith' (Mercier, 1910, p. 23). The criticism goes further by arguing that modernism dismisses all revelation, thus negating the authority of the church, as it was established by Jesus Christ. The problem is that modernism cancels all the church's authority, based on the fact that the spiritual cannot be proven and God does not exist. A two thousand year old institution had no claim of existing, in modernist key. Mercier turns to Christ as the pronouncer and imposer of the teachings that assure eternal life. In other words, Christ is not to be criticized or negated. By negating Christ one negates the entire chain of clerical authority, all the way to the Pope himself (Mercier, 1910, p. 24).

Reconstruction cannot apply to any area of society's life. Sterrett argues that any modern age has a set of good characteristics, as well as a set of bad ones. If reconstruction is done out of a misplaced understanding of the modern good, it follows that all history is useless. Heritage is put aside and ignored, because it is deemed unworthy of all that the modern age represents, it is tore down and rebuilt. Ignoring history means ignoring value and worth. These are two of the elements that make up the life of any society. If the working principle is to destroy the old and build the new, the obvious consequence is that each new generation will destroy the old, in favor of the new modern age. Every generation will tear down the world of the previous generation, and it will build in the likeness of age. Sterrett points out that such a method will prove a disaster, simply because if heritage is ignored, building anew will incorporate all the evils of the age. Heritage has a precise purpose and that is to safeguard the critical method. This means that heritage helps one to separate good from evil, and thus promote and give further the best possible teachings for the next generation (Macbride Sterrett, 1922, p. 22).

The issue of past and present, religious denominations and their schisms from one another, are integral parts of the modernist program. Gates argues that the modernist will go beyond these breaks, and he will look at Christianity as a whole, not simply favoring one side or the other. The modernist is the true Catholic, for Christianity is universal and a

whole, at best painted in different colors. In this context, the modernist argues in favor of God as one, universal, One who is everywhere and in all things. As Sterrett, Gareth argues that the true modernist will look at the heritage of the entire Christendom. The modernist will not take the side of any denomination (Gates, 1911, p. 50), but here he differs from Sterrett, who was a clergyman in the Episcopalian church.

Moral values and the use of history

Good and evil are elements of morality, but Sterrett's idea can be applied to anything from morals, to architecture. This is the precise point that Sterrett makes, when talking about progress and the old as a hindrance for development (Macbride Sterrett, 1922, p. 22). Heritage will set some against others, simply because all have agenda's. Old buildings that stay in the path of development and progress, are extensions of people's ideas in relation to those who think differently. It depends which party has more power. When people do not consider others as valuable, regardless of their perspectives, the evils of the past will hinder any progress. The value of human life could be reevaluated, but the heritage of the past is the one that adds a foundation for any ideological development. Does this mean that all that is old should be kept? What of the old constitutes the heritage? Sterrett points to the idea of an old castle that is in the middle of the new city. He does not argue in favor of demolishing it, but in favor of renovating and accommodating the visitors into modern housing conditions. Obviously that all the other houses surrounding the castle have been destroyed by development, but that does not mean that it is a negative aspect. Sterrett argues in favor of identifying the relics that are imbued with historical meaning and that are reference points for the past. This means that many of the little things will be kept as visual examples – an old wooden house – but others will be destroyed in order to make way for a correct progress. The point that Sterrett makes here is that a true modernist will look at the past and select meaningfulness, values, morals, he will reform them, if necessary, and he will pass it on to the future generations (Macbride Sterrett, 1922, p. 23).

Sterrett's perspective on modernism seems to show a unified body of ideological identity. However, J. R. Slattery presents modernism as a colorful body of thinkers, diverse and independent of one another. They were workers in various branches. They also worked in different countries. He presents the modernists as having a single purpose, in spite of their diversity, namely the reconciliation of science and the church. A further explanation makes Slattery's remark a significant one. He points that the reconciliation between the two is the result of the genuine love of the modernists towards the churches, whose sons they claim to be (Slattery, 1909, p. 556). There is no hatred towards the church, as there is no desire to downgrade or change the essence of the church. It is rather a modification or a reconfiguration of the purpose of the church by a return the fundamentals of the Gospel message.

Sterrett writes as religious modernist. He even defines himself as such. This means that he pays close attention to the Christian heritage within the church, but he filters the old teachings that are valid for his time, as well as the old things that have become irrelevant for the modern church. It also means that the church itself should keep a close eye on the heritage, for the sake of the modern people who enter it and are trying to find meaning. At this point Sterrett acknowledges that the castle image is not usable, but reverts to nature and uses the image of the nautilus. This animal is building new chambers in the shell, only in organic connections to the old ones. It is an image of the harmony between old and new. The old already exists, but there is place and a fundamental need for the new. They are not mutually exclusive, but reciprocally inclusive. Again, this argument is valid only for the spiritual aspect of life, not for the organization of the church. The image argues in favor of collaboration between old and new, in the same way that the rings of the shell are bound together until the animal dies. The shells are not broken off, but are kept for the life giving environment in which the animal lives (Macbride Sterrett, 1922, p. 23).

Sterrett applies the image of the nautilus to the psychological acknowledgement of the relation between body and soul. The value of these two elements is evaluated at every age. According to Sterrett, there is no need to separate the two and distribute value to the one in the detriment or to the destruction of the other. The body has a certain value, while the soul has another value. These are not mutually exclusive, but in an unseen collaboration. The true modernist will value both, without any action to destroy one of the two. Just as there is a collaboration and constant revision of values, Sterrett argues that religion must go forward, by paying close attention to the heritage it brings along. There no need to abandon heritage altogether, just as the soul does not shed the body, or the body does not shed the soul. As people make up the church, it exists through them, but it is not limited to them. There is also a supernatural element to it, which is fundamental. However, this aspect is considered by Sterrett to be fundamental. He points to all churches, from the Anglican to the Presbyterian, through the Episcopalian and the Greek Orthodox, as churches which are encysted. Sterrett is not content with the fact

that the churches accuse and remove any modernist who contradicts their perspectives. Sterrett makes the point that such an attitude might push out those within the church, and keep out those who consider joining the church (Macbride Sterrett, 1922, p. 25).

Schism and the morality

The single most troublesome element in the path of healthy human relationships and overall progress is man, more precisely: man's 'sinful selfishness and capricious willfulness' (Macbride Sterrett, 1922, p. 26). Man can create an ideal, but he will never reach it, because, as Sterrett points out, man lusts for autocratic power – as a symbol of self-aggrandizement; but he also shows no appreciation for 'a nurturing institution' – the church (Macbride Sterrett, 1922, p. 26). Man's actions are full of evil-doings, that Sterrett names 'so much of the devil in it all' (Macbride Sterrett, 1922, p. 26), that any idea is impossible to achieve. It is no wonder for Sterrett that society cannot better itself, since evil lurks in all, but not in equal measures.

Christianity is made up of various ages, which are characterized by various traits. Sterrett believes that a genuine modernist will acknowledge Christianity in all its forms and ages, from the Apostolic to the Reformation. In spite of all the heritage of the Christianity, Sterrett is well aware that the modern man may know more, due to the broader education. However, in spite of this kind of education, one may not be better when it comes to knowledge in the higher sense (Macbride Sterrett, 1922, p. 26). Morals and aptitudes may be more widely known, but their implementation and practice may not be done properly, in spite of the heritage. Intellectually, the modern man may be better equipped, and yet lack a moral and spiritual character. At this point, Sterrett argues that it is normal for children to surpass their parents, but this does not imply a complete break with the parents. Respect and love are given, at least as before, even if the children have surpassed the parents by far. Using this image argues that in the social and religious sphere, the modernist must surpass the ages past, but not with contempt, but with due respect and the obligation to improve on all past ways and methods. Perhaps the most respectful way in which one can bring progress into society is by showing the proper respect for the past. Such an attitude will create cultural strings that can bind generations, not by overlapping interest, but respect and self-awareness (Macbride Sterrett, 1922, p. 26).

Heritage for Sterrett means historical fact. It means the same for J. Bampton. However, Bampton argues against the modernist movement. One of the reasons is that the modernists do not consider historical facts as the traditional Christians do. Bampton points out that due to their Kantian background, historical fact is resumed exclusively to experience. The second point in Bampton's line of thought is that truth means one thing for the conservatives, while for the modernists it means something different. He acknowledges that they accept the narratives of the Gospels, but with a definition of true 'truth as sign or symbol of truth, or true as symbolizing what is true, true, not as possessing a fact-value, but as possessing a moral or spiritual value' (Bampton, 1913, pp. 63–64). This almost cancel the historical fact. However, only the symbolized spiritual truth is the only one that matters. History as it unraveled is almost irrelevant. On the other hand, conservative theology aims precisely for the historical fact (Bampton, 1913, p. 64).

In order to understand the value of the past, education is a basic requirement. Sterrett does not try to argue in detail in favor of education, because he considers it part of any civilized society. He considers that education is an integral part of institutions that range from the family to the state, from church to science, from art to economics. Sterrett argues that such institutions are meant to promote higher ways of living. They address the basic need of the individual and the society to interact, to connect, to relate and to create structures of socialization (Macbride Sterrett, 1922, pp. 28–29).

The church, regardless of which Christian denomination, has been a constant presence in the last two millennia, with all the positive and negative aspects. It was either persecuted or the persecutor, either on its own or in tight relations with the state, either dedicated to the Biblical understanding of loving one's neighbor or in a rampant quest for self-aggrandizement. Regardless of how the church(es) behaved throughout history, Sterrett argues that one of the main roles it had was to spread the teachings of Jesus Christ worldwide. In the message there was a teaching about God's Kingdom. The issues surfaced also at the trial of Jesus, when he spoke of himself as a king, but not of this world, but of a spiritual one. Later, the apostles and their followers took the message and spread in, eventually, worldwide. The church bore a message that had a constant impact in the world: the love of the neighbor. It must be thoroughly underlined that this love is not reserved for the members of the church, or for the members of the churches, but for any human being. Sterrett argues that the church cannot claim to be the Kingdom of God, and labels it as an 'arrogant and groundless assumption' (Macbride Sterrett,

1922, p. 34). The role and purpose of the church does not start with the assumption that it is the Kingdom. In other words, the church cannot claim spiritual authority that it never had. The church did usurp this position, at various points in time, and tried to impose it on society, as well as on its own members.

Writing more than ten years before Sterrett, David Torrey argues that it would be impossible to believe that Christianity had no founder. Thus he places a firm grounding on the existence of Jesus for the church. Christianity would not have been so successful without a prominent leader. He also points out that Christianity had a radically different message from any other religion, and that its founder's message was the key element that gave Christianity its specific mission and practice (Torrey, 1910, pp. 74–76).

The true purpose of the church

According to Sterrett the church has a much better role than to claim any kind of secular authority, and it also has a higher calling than that of controlling the world, or impose rules and regulations. The first role of the church is to promote the religious life of men. It clearly refers to the spiritual life of the believers. The church has to minister the relations between God and man, but through the ministry and life of Jesus Christ. Sterrett makes a sharp distinction between the spiritual and the religious. The first has a wider meaning than the second and it is more important. The spiritual supersedes the religious. The church connects to the believers not only in the realm of church life, but especially in the 'secular spheres of this kingdom' (Macbride Sterrett, 1922, p. 34). The church should not separate or alienate its members, and it should not take them out of society, into secluded spaces, where the evils of the world cannot reach. Instead, the church must be actively involved in all spheres of the secular, in order to promote and uphold spiritual values that permeate into the everyday lives of its believers.

After making sure that he explains what the church is and what its purpose is, Sterrett argues in favor of what the church has done throughout the ages. He points out that it is the result of a message, the Gospels, and this means its purpose lies within it. As long as the church embodies the message of the Gospels, it has a legitimate existence. After all, the church is *jure divino* as long as it makes the message of the Gospel manifest in the world. In its two thousand year history, there have been great accomplishment, but Sterrett places a correct emphasis on the criticism that it must also justly receive. For modern man it is important to question whatever surrounds him, and it is just as important to strive for what is true. As the church has had both positive and negative actions, it is imperative for its members to keep a correct perspective on her. Sterrett points out that the impact of the church in the world was so great that life on earth would have been far less worth living than without her. This has been achieved only because it was the ministrant of the Gospel message (Macbride Sterrett, 1922, p. 36).

In order to explain how the church has grown and how it should survive in the future, but also what the relations are between its present life and the past, Sterrett presents the image of tree. The roots are the life of the tree. It gets its nourishment from the soil through the roots. The leaves fall each autumn and form the soil that the tree feeds from. By growing each year, the tree becomes stronger and bigger. The new bark proves the health and the growth of the tree. Sterrett points out that in this process the new bark engulf the old, but by 'embracing' all the other layers of years past. As long as a tree lives, this process is repeated each year. Sterrett is strong supporter of passing on the heritage of past ages, but he is adamant in having a critical methodology in order to prevent any stagnation. The church must grow and develop, by looking back on its history. The process presupposes an active assessment of all its known actions. If there were negative events and wrong decisions they must be acknowledged, just as the positive events and good decisions. They form the layers that the new generation will look at and develop their present and the future of coming generations. The church should not ignore or hide past events. Instead, argues Sterrett, as part of the social and cultural structure, the church should do what it has always done: spread the message of the Gospel. The reason is that the essence of the message conveys a set of ideas which can be transformed into personal belief, which will be manifested towards one's neighbor. It is paramount that the church continue in the light of that message, not by engulfing the new for the sake of the new (Macbride Sterrett, 1922, p. 35).

The authority of the church: the four elements

As Sterrett points out, the church has four major elements that give it strength, if considered properly: polity, creed, cult and sacred literature. They convey identity and purpose. Here he returns to the example of another tree. This time it was the example of a tree purged in fire. It was an old tree, rotten inside, but still alive. When it caught on fire, apparently it cleaned

the rotten parts, but stopped at the healthy ones. When everyone was expecting the tree to fall, it continued to grow and stay alive. This was the tree outside of Sterrett's residence. The example is wonderful because it shows human expectations, in comparison with God's activity. Sterrett does not deny the existence of God, but refrains from considering him only as the church depicts him. He argues in favor of his existence and he makes no apology for doing so. However, Sterrett criticizes the way the church brings the message of the Gospel to the people. He refers to a book written by former army members who claim that the church communicates its message in a language that is unknown even to those trained in it. Sterrett argues in favor of simple and clear messages that can resonate with society's needs. Any outgrown and worn-out language will do no favor to any man in need. These seasoned soldiers cry out for a better vernacular, in order for all to understand. It is an old cry that was part of the Reformation's core: the Bible and the liturgy in the language of the people. Three hundred years later the battles of the front ask for help from the church, and the case makes it that the very church that could have offered help for the soul, was unable to satisfy the need (Macbride Sterrett, 1922, p. 36).

The modernist should always look at the church as objectively as possible and evaluate her state. Sterrett, as a modernist, points to the critical fact that the church has 'never been quite dead', nor has it been 'lukewarm' (Macbride Sterrett, 1922, p. 36). This is a harsh evaluation of the institution that claims to work with the Creator of the world. However, in the mind of a modernist, such an affirmation makes sense, because truth should be presented as is, not to please statistics or the members of the church. If something is wrong with the church, it should be mentioned, because failing to do so, would impair the purpose and the mission of the church. The second part of the evaluation has to do with what the church has to say about Christ. Sterrett accuses the church of creating too many theories about Jesus and his work. There should have been less theories and more interaction with the world. Theories can help the church up to a point, beyond that it can become impregnable and too hard to understand. In spite of this obvious problem, Sterrett does praise the church for constantly emphasizing the supremacy of Christ in the church (Macbride Sterrett, 1922, p. 36). If Christ is taken out of the church the very purpose and meaning of it disappears. If this were to happen, the church would invalidate its calling and mission. Thus it could be replaced by any other institution.

For Sterrett the church is an integral part of human history, in spite of its errors. In the end of his essay, Sterrett defines the church as 'an organization for the propagation of the spirit of the Master – of the disposition of the heart and mind that will further the coming of His Kingdom on earth, sanctifying all done in other spheres of man's secular life, has four aspects – a Way of Life, Polity, Doctrine and Cult' (Macbride Sterrett, 1922, p. 37).

Sterrett believes that God and church should remain an integral part of human history. However, there can be a backlash for too much familiarity with God. The familiarity with God is what Oliver Quick underlines, it can make God so much part of the believer's life and overall experience, that one might lose sight of Him, together with the dissolution of all spiritual values (Quick, 1922, pp. 50–51). In such a context, even faith can be dissolved into the experience of everyday spiritual familiarity with Him. God, Christ, church and spirituality can be downgraded by a fruitless effort to explain God to man, with the utmost perfect logic. Failure is part of the life of everyday believers. However, the effort to understand God and to present Him in a certain way, must be made in effort to help man to come closer to the spirituality of the godhead. The church, as part of human society, should carry the message of Christ. The results of a coherent presentation of God to man can lead society as a whole towards a better understanding of one's neighbor.

Conclusions

J. Macbride Sterrett is a convinced religious modernist. He sets himself apart from the critics of early modernism by not denying the spiritual, the transcendent and the church. He also acknowledges the place of Jesus Christ in this scheme. He also understands the progress of ideology and of religious (Christian) dogma, but also that of science. They should not be in conflict. In such a context, the church plays a crucial role in stabilizing morals and values, in order to aid society in its quest for peace and social harmony. In spite of all shortcomings, Sterrett believes that the church can aid the social development.

In this essay the main points of Sterrett's argument regarding his vision of modernism were explained and compared to the perspectives of other modernists or anti-modernists of his time. His book was published almost ten years after the arguments described in the other thinkers were laid out. In spite of this it took him more than a decade to put together his entire book. His perspectives present another face of modernism, which is not known in Protestant circles. *Modernist* and *religious modernist*, at least for Sterrett, are two different things. Although some of the thinkers describes the modernist

movement as having a genuine desire to make peace between science and religion, the Romanian Baptist environment, generally, think of modernism as a complete faith-killer. Sterrett presents another face of modernism. It is one that managed to integrate the transcendent in such a way that is quite familiar to other conservative theologies.

The ideas of Sterrett are useful for the better understanding of how different patterns of thought develop within one philosophical/theological ideology or pattern of thought. Sterrett presents a user-friendly face of modernism that argues in favor of a genuine respect for the past and its usefulness for modern man. Perhaps the most important aspect of this part of Sterrett's argument is that a modernist should keep history and the heritage of ages past in a most respectful light. Therefore, being new/modern does not imply breaking with the past – as certain zealots might argue – but its genuine development for the generations to come.

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