

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

E.Y. Mullins:

The Axioms of Religion*

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INTRODUCTION

One of the towering figures of Southern Baptist history, Edgar Young Mullins led Southern Baptists through some of the most tumultuous decades of American religious history. As a Baptist statesman, theologian, educator, and denominationalist, E. Y. Mullins shaped the denominational consensus that, in turn, shaped Southern Baptist life and thought well into the twentieth century.



Born January 5, 1860 to Seth and Corrine Mullins of Franklin County, Mississippi, Mullins most formative years were lived through the Civil War and Reconstruction. A Baptist minister with a Master of Arts degree from Mississippi College, Seth Mullins spent most of his ministry as both preacher and school teacher. When Mississippi experienced a breakdown of order during Reconstruction, Seth Mullins moved his young family to Corsicana, Texas.

Taught largely by his father, E. Y. Mullins demonstrated an early love for learning and reading. His first part-time job came at the age of eleven, and his teen-age vocational experiences included stints as typesetter for the local newspaper and telegraph operator. Demonstrating administrative as well as telegraphic gifts, Mullins took full charge of the Corsicana telegraph office at age fifteen.¹

At age sixteen Mullins entered the first cadet class at the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas. In reality, the young school was actually neither agricultural nor

* E.Y. Mullins: *The Axioms of Religion* (from *The Library of Baptist Classics*) edited by Timothy and Denise George (1997). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

¹ Isla May Mullins, *Edgar Young Mullins: An Intimate Biography* (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1929), p. 11. Isla May Mullins, wife of E. Y. Mullins, wrote this biography within a year of Mullins' death. It stands as one of the most important sources for information on Mullins' early years.

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mechanical in focus. In general terms it was a liberal arts college with a military cadet corps. As William E. Ellis comments, "A. and M. displayed two dominant characteristics during these early years of existence: a pervading southern 'Lost Cause' atmosphere and a lack of clear direction for its chartered purpose, the training of young men in the agricultural and mechanical arts."² As a young cadet, Mullins received lessons in both discipline and leadership, and served as a cadet officer. His military bearing and tall stature became life-long marks of distinction.

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The "A and M" experience was charged with both military discipline and Confederate memory. Jefferson Davis was invited to be the first president of the school and, though Davis declined the offer, the school was a powerful symbol of Southern pride and resistance. Though Mullins would later serve as a world citizen and as a bridge to Baptists in the North, his roots were deeply and decidedly southern.

After graduation, Mullins returned to service as a telegraph operator in order to save money for a legal education. At this stage, Mullins planned to enter the law, and had shown no interest in following in his father's footsteps.

Indeed, Mullins was not converted until 1880, when he attended revival services in Dallas under the preaching of Major William E. Penn. Shortly thereafter, Mullins was baptized by his father at the Corsicana church. A "definite call to the ministry" came just a few months later, and Mullins departed for The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary within the year.

Arriving in Louisville in 1881, Mullins quickly immersed himself in seminary studies. Southern Seminary had been established just one year prior to Mullins' birth, and had been in Louisville only four years.³ Louisville was a new experience for Mullins, whose entire life had at that point been spent in the deep south and Texas, which at that time also reflected a distinctly southern culture. As a border city, Louisville was an important intersection of influences from both north and south.

Mullins chose to pursue his theological education at Southern Seminary because of its academic reputation and its standing in the Baptist denomination. As his widow later reflected, Mullins went to Southern Seminary because, to his mind, there was "no conception of school work except that it should be of the highest grade obtainable."⁴

² William E. Ellis, "A Man of Books and a Man of the People:" *E. Y. Mullins and the Crisis of Moderate Baptist Leadership* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), p. 11.

³ Established in Greenville, South Carolina in 1859, the seminary moved to Louisville in 1877 in order to escape the impoverishment of its birthplace in the wake of the Civil War.

⁴ *Mullins*, p. 13.

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The Southern Seminary of Mullins' student experience was a school with clear theological convictions and a much-respected faculty, which included the school's founder and faculty chairman, James Petigru Boyce. Boyce, later appointed the school's first president, was the most formative figure in the seminary's establishment and early development. A robust and energetic figure in both thought and life, Boyce had been educated at Brown University and Princeton Theological Seminary, and had thus received his university and seminary education in the North. Nevertheless, Boyce was a committed southerner and the only son of one of the South's wealthiest families.

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A Charlestonian by birth and a Calvinist by conviction, Boyce shaped Southern Seminary into a greatly respected theological institution—and placed his personal stamp on the seminary's doctrinal stance and substance. As both president and professor of theology, Boyce exerted a powerful influence on the young E. Y. Mullins.⁵

When Mullins arrived as a student, Southern Seminary had just emerged from its first great theological crisis. The first faculty member added to the founders, a young and promising scholar, had been forced to resign in the face of charges that he had accepted the conclusions of German biblical criticism and thus rejected the full inspiration and authority of the Old Testament. The young scholar, Crawford Howell Toy, resigned in 1879 and was replaced by Basil Manly, Jr., one of the original four faculty.⁶ The Toy controversy threatened the very existence of the young seminary, and Mullins arrived just as the institution was emerging from the intensity of the conflict.

Quickly establishing himself as a leader among students, Mullins was elected to serve as administrator of the student's residential hall—a post that included responsibility for purchasing food and supplies, as well as adjudicating student disputes. Later, Mullins was to take satisfaction from the fact that no issue related to the hall had required faculty attention under his charge.

Mullins was recognized as a “full graduate” of the seminary at commencement in 1885, and was chosen by his peers to speak at the graduation ceremony. Mullins delivered an

⁵ The “Library of Baptist Classics” features a volume including Boyce's seminal address, “Three Changes in Theological Education,” which was the *Magna Carta* for the establishment of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. See *Treasures from the Baptist Heritage*. “Library of Baptist Classics,” ed. Timothy and Denise George (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), pp. 103-138.

⁶ Manly was charged by Boyce to make clear the seminary's fidelity to a verbal plenary doctrine of biblical inspiration. Manly's assertion of biblical inspiration, inerrancy, and authority is now available in the Library of Baptist Classics. See Basil Manly, Jr., *The Bible Doctrine of Inspiration*, “The Library of Baptist Classics,” ed. Timothy and Denise George (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995).

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address entitled “Manliness in the Ministry” and shortly thereafter began service as pastor of the historic Baptist church in Harrodsburg, Kentucky.

Prior to accepting the call to the Harrodsburg church, Mullins had planned to serve as a missionary to Brazil under the charge of the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. He had written the board and indicated his willingness to serve, but had received no response. Mullins was aware that financial constraints had severely limited the number of missionaries the struggling board could support. Later, his physician would warn Mullins against foreign service.

Soon after arriving in Harrodsburg, Mullins married Isla May Hawley of Louisville. She would later bear two sons, but both would die in childhood. According to Isla May Mullins, the Harrodsburg years were happy and productive, though E. Y. Mullins was prepared for a more metropolitan ministry, and such an opportunity would soon arise.

In 1888 Mullins was called as pastor of the Lee Street Baptist Church in Baltimore, Maryland. He would serve this church for seven years, learning a great deal about the challenges of an urban church in a diverse city. Like Louisville, Baltimore was a meeting place of northern and southern cultures. The city would later be associated with H. L. Menken, as well as with J. Gresham Machen, who was the son of a leading Baltimore family.

According to Ellis, Mullins developed a growing social consciousness in Baltimore. Clearly, the presence of the urban poor and increasing social stratification presented challenges to Mullins’ theological reflection. After seven years of ministry, and the death in infancy of their second son, Mullins accepted appointment as associate secretary of the Foreign Mission Board, thereby reconnecting with his early missionary impulse. Nevertheless, conflict soon developed between Mullins and his superior, the board’s secretary, R. H. Willingham.

The next stage in Mullins’ ministry was service as pastor to the Newton Centre Baptist Church in suburban Boston, Massachusetts. Mullins—son of the South and graduate of Texas A and M—now found himself pastor to a prosperous, well educated, and cultured congregation in one of Boston’s most exclusive neighborhoods. The church—identified with northern Baptists, and not the Southern Baptist Convention—also put Mullins in close proximity to the Newton Theological Institution as well as Harvard College and Boston University. Mullins thrived in the rich intellectual environment and enjoyed his ministry in Boston, but his service there would last only four years.

In Mullins’ absence, his *alma mater* had been thrown into its second great theological crisis. This time the issue was Baptist history and the claim of historic successionism made

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by some Baptists. President Boyce had died in 1888, and had been succeeded as president by John A. Broadus, another of the founders and the leading Baptist preacher of his day. When Broadus died in 1895, he was succeeded in office by William Heth Whitsitt, whose arguments concerning Baptist history soon set off a firestorm within the Southern Baptist Convention.

By 1898 the controversy had reached a fever pitch, and the seminary's future was again called into question. After failing to ameliorate the crisis, the seminary's trustees accepted Whitsitt's resignation, effective in 1899.

In searching for a new president, the trustees sought a leader who would, if possible, be untouched by the Whitsitt controversy. The trustees turned to E. Y. Mullins, who had been outside the mainstream of Southern Baptist life during his Newton Centre years, and was generally untouched by the Whitsitt controversy.⁷

Mullins took office as Southern Seminary's fourth president as the nineteenth century drew to a close and the twentieth century was dawning. He was quickly established as one of the most influential leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention and eventually gained stature as the denomination's preeminent theologian.

Following the example of James P. Boyce, Mullins served as professor of theology as well as president. In later years, his teaching would be curtailed by administrative and denominational responsibilities, but Mullins would always consider himself a theologian as well as president of the institution. A prolific author of books and articles, Mullins garnered influence which extended far beyond the Southern Baptist Convention.

Under Mullins' leadership the seminary grew in both enrollment and reputation, and the faculty doubled in number. During the Mullins years, Southern Seminary was the largest seminary in the world, and before his death the seminary would be relocated to a new campus, thus allowing even further growth.

Mullins transformed the seminary presidency during his tenure, establishing the president as chief executive officer of the institution, as well as its senior academic administrator. Furthermore, he expended considerable energy in fund raising, building

⁷ Interestingly, Mullins had supported Whitsitt in articles published in *The Southern Baptist*, and Mullins held virtually the same view of Baptist history as that of Whitsitt. Commenting on this fact in the seminary's centennial history, William Mueller stated: "As one reflects on the circumstances preceding the election of Dr. E. Y. Mullins in July, 1899, one cannot help wondering about the strange ways of God and man." See William A. Mueller, *A History of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1959), p. 179.

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the seminary's endowment as well as the new campus—"The Beeches"—to which the seminary moved in 1926.

As the Southern Baptist Convention entered the twentieth century, E. Y. Mullins emerged as one of the denomination's most formative influences. Mullins sought and fulfilled his role as denominational statesman, and as the convention's most articulate theologian. He served the Southern Baptist Convention as president from 1921 to 1924, and was the primary architect of the convention's first official confession of faith, "The Baptist Faith and Message," adopted in 1925.

Mullins was also instrumental in the establishment of the Baptist World Alliance as a world-wide fellowship of Baptist conventions and organizations. He served the BWA as president from 1923 to 1928.

The previous year, Mullins had developed a serious illness while visiting Poland. He failed to recover from the illness upon his return to the seminary, and his failing health prevented him from attending the Southern Baptist Convention, though it met in Louisville. His 1928 presidential address to the Baptist World Alliance was delivered by his friend and colleague in Southern Baptist leadership, George W. Truett.

Mullins died on November 23, 1928, and was buried in the seminary's burial ground in Louisville's historic Cave Hill Cemetery. The monument erected by the seminary celebrated the ministry of E. Y. Mullins as "fourth president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (1899-1928), president of the Southern Baptist Convention (1921-1924), president of the Baptist World Alliance (1923-1928), preacher, teacher, scholar, administrator, Christian statesman, world citizen, and servant of God."

MULLINS THE THEOLOGIAN

As president of Southern Seminary, Mullins also served as chairman of the faculty—a responsibility which allowed him to set his own teaching agenda. At the onset Mullins declared his intention to teach theology, thus returning to the example set by founding president James P. Boyce.

But, if Mullins was determined to follow Boyce's example in this regard, he was also to set a decisive change in theological direction for the seminary. Boyce was a classical Calvinist in the tradition of Archibald Alexander, Charles Hodge, and the other Princeton theologians. His evangelical Calvinism was the hallmark of theological conviction among educated Baptist theologians of the day, and matched the convictions of grassroots Southern Baptists as well.

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Mullins greatly admired Boyce, and used a revised edition of Boyce's *Abstract of Systematic Theology* as his textbook in theology until Mullins wrote his own textbook, *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression*, in 1917.⁸ This volume would remain in constant use at Southern Seminary for over 30 years. Though Mullins dedicated the book to Boyce's memory, his new textbook charted a course away from Boyce's theological system.

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Through his studies under the founding faculty at Southern Seminary, Mullins had become thoroughly acquainted with the evangelical Calvinism Boyce and his faculty colleagues represented and taught. But in the fifteen years between his graduation from the seminary and his appointment as president, Mullins had been taking stock of other theological systems.

Most importantly, Mullins had come into contact with both evangelicals and liberals in the North. His pastorates in Baltimore and Boston exposed Mullins to the theological systems then current among northerners—systems which had scarcely touched Baptists in the South.

Furthermore, Mullins was also influenced by proximity to the faculties at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, and to the faculties at Boston and Harvard, as well as the Newton Theological Institute. Through these and other influences, Mullins began explorations in the writings of European theologians such as Germans Friedrich Schleiermacher and Albrecht Ritschl. More directly, he was introduced to the pragmatism of William James at Harvard and the personalism of Borden Parker Bowne at Boston University.

These new streams in theology, philosophy, and psychology marked a revolution in thought on both sides of the Atlantic. The last decades of the nineteenth century were the high water mark of liberal thought in the wake of the Enlightenment. Confidence in the inevitable course of human progress was abundant, and a brave new world beckoned as the twentieth century dawned.

The Enlightenment's famed "turn to the subject" set the foundation for a revolutionary emphasis on human experience and the centrality of individual experience in all questions of knowledge. Thus, for Schleiermacher, theology was not, in essence, the systematic expression of revealed truth, but reflection upon religious experience.

Similarly, movements in psychology and philosophy followed similar patterns of development. William James, whose philosophy of pragmatism set the stage for dramatic

⁸ E. Y. Mullins, *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression* (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1917).

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change in several disciplines, insisted that truth and experience were inextricably linked. As Mullins would explain, pragmatism “renounces the idea that truths are ready made and given to us independent of and apart from our experience.”⁹ (9) From Bowne, whose personalistic idealism led to theological conflict with conservatives, Mullins gained a critical appreciation for the centrality of the person as the starting point for theological understanding. As he explained, personalism “takes the individual and personal life of man as its starting point, the highest datum possible for any form of philosophy.”¹⁰

Bowne’s personalism would become firmly established as a central influence in Mullins’ theological system, affirming and undergirding Mullins’ shift from the Calvinism of Boyce to a theological position centered—not on revelation—but on religious experience. Bowne explained the theological ramifications of his philosophical system as follows: “A world of persons with a Supreme Person at the head is the conception to which we come as the result of our critical reflections.”¹¹ All knowledge is personal knowledge, and all personal knowledge comes through the medium of human experience. Religious experience is but one form of human experience, and it is the experience of human personality with the divine Personality. In order to see the dramatic impact of this worldview and epistemology on Mullins, note this statement from Mullins’ major work on revelation: “The bases of religious knowledge lie in personality and personal relationships.”¹²

This shift from biblical revelation to religious experience as the starting point and critical principle for theology represented a revolution from the influence of Boyce and Mullins’ other teachers at Southern Seminary. Though this revolution would not lead Mullins to reject their doctrinal system as a whole, it did mean that Mullins and his teachers were starting from radically different theories of knowledge and following very different theological principles.

This revolution did not necessarily make Mullins a theological liberal. Indeed, Mullins sought to be a defender of evangelical conviction against liberalism and the developing modernism. But Mullins’ reliance on religious experience did mean that his theological system and his defense of the faith would share a common starting point with the modernists.

⁹ E. Y. Mullins, “Pragmatism, Humanism, and Personalism—The New Philosophic Movement,” *Review and Expositor* 5 (1908), p. 503.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 510.

¹¹ Borden Parker Bowne, “Personalism,” in *American Protestant Thought in the Liberal Era*, ed. William R. Hutchison (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1968), p. 87.

¹² Edgar Young Mullins, *Freedom and Authority in Religion* (Philadelphia: Griffith and Rowland, 1913), p. 4.

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Mullins sought to affirm the truthfulness of the Bible and its status as divinely inspired, without affirming any specific theory of inspiration. He described both verbal and “dynamical” theories of biblical inspiration and seemed to dismiss both, without identifying his own understanding. The fact of inspiration was, to Mullins, more important than any theory of inspiration. Mullins stalwartly defended the supernatural elements of the Bible and rejected those whose anti-supernatural bias led them to dismiss the miracles and other elements of Scripture as non-historical or untrue.

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On the other hand, Mullins also accepted a division between scientific and religious knowledge. Scientific knowledge deals with the “facts” of the natural world, while religious knowledge is concerned with the “facts” of the supernatural world and human religious experience. Against the anti-supernaturalists and the worldview of scientific naturalism, Mullins argued that “Religion and science do not differ in the sense that science deals with facts, with forms of reality, while religion has to do with mere beliefs or fancies or forms of unreality.”¹³ Further, given his insistence upon the centrality of experience, Mullins was also able to claim that religion “too is empirical in that it starts from actually given data of experience.”¹⁴

Revelation is thus tied to religious “facts” and religious experience. This is Mullins’ claim concerning the veracity of biblical revelation. The religious truth in the Bible is secured by divine revelation mediated through the experience of the biblical writers—and mediated again through the religious experience of the reader. Mullins explicitly removed any claim of inspiration connected to what he saw as non-religious issues.

This methodological innovation left Mullins free to negotiate during the turbulent years of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy. The single issue most contested in that controversy was evolution. Mullins’ understanding of biblical revelation and authority led him to defend the divine creation of the natural world, but also to insist that science was free to pursue its own study of the natural world, without the necessity of conflict with biblical truth.

Mullins never declared himself on the evolution issue—insisting that as a theologian he would deal with other matters of religious interest. Nevertheless, he did castigate anti-evolutionists as “ill-advised” and he was also active within the Kentucky legislature, seeking to oppose anti-evolutionary legislation. Though his personal position was never clear—some claimed by intention—Mullins seemed to affirm some sort of theistic evolution, but only to the extent that such a position would not threaten the supernatural

¹³ Ibid., p. 213.

¹⁴ Ibid.

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element in the Bible, nor identify him as an evolutionist.¹⁵ His position confused both the evolutionists and their opponents. During the infamous Scopes trial, Mullins refused to assist either William Jennings Bryan or Mullins' friend Shailer Mathews, dean of the University of Chicago Divinity School, who assisted Clarence Darrow. That both Bryan and Mathews thought Mullins could be of assistance indicates the opaqueness of Mullins' position.¹⁶

In his last book, *Christianity at the Cross Roads*, Mullins vigorously defended the truth of the Church's claims concerning Christ, over against the denials of the modernists. He insisted that science has nothing to do with the claims concerning Jesus Christ, for such claims were beyond legitimate scientific inquiry. He lamented the "reduced Christianity" and "reduced Christ" of the modernists and firmly landed on the evangelical side of the Christological divide. But, in order to do so, Mullins again insisted that no conflict between religion and science was possible, for religion was an autonomous discipline free from naturalistic investigation.¹⁷

In the eyes of some conservatives, Mullins was attempting to save Christianity from science by forfeiting its very foundation of truth. J. Gresham Machen, the scholarly fundamentalist who fought on the front lines of the controversy, acknowledged Mullins' intention and his recognition that "the religious issue of the present day is not between two varieties of evangelical Christianity, but between Christianity on the one hand and something that is radically opposed to Christianity on the other."¹⁸

Nevertheless, Machen registered serious concern regarding Mullins' separation of science, philosophy, and religion into three autonomous spheres. Most urgently, Machen was certain that Mullins' principle separating science and religion would lead to the destruction of "the entire doctrinal or factual basis of the Christian religion."¹⁹ As Machen set his case: "This principle of the sharp separation between science and philosophy and religion leads, we think, logically into an abyss of skepticism."²⁰ Machen was confident that this was not Mullins' intention, and that Mullins actually contradicts his own principle by insisting on the factual and historical basis of Christian doctrines. Religious

¹⁵ Space does not allow an adequate treatment of this issue. For further reading, see the work by Ellis listed above.

¹⁶ Mathews provided Mullins' name to Darrow as one who would defend evolution. Mullins responded with an immediate and unqualified rejection of evolution, and claimed that he was "not a theistic nor any other kind of evolutionist." He affirmed the same to Bryan. See Ellis, p. 195.

¹⁷ E. Y. Mullins, *Christianity at the Cross Roads* (New York: George H. Doran, 1924).

¹⁸ J. Gresham Machen, "The Relation of Religion to Science and Philosophy," A Review of *Christianity at the Cross Roads* by E. Y. Mullins, *Princeton Theological Review* (January 1926), p. 38.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

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“facts,” insisted Machen, are not different in essential nature from facts in any other area of life or thought.

Mullins sought to establish a mediating position in relation to the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy. Clearly not a modernist, Mullins nonetheless pursued friendly relations with modernists in the North—especially those at the University of Chicago Divinity School—until those relationships cooled in the early 1920s. Within the Southern Baptist Convention’s evolution controversy of the same decade, Mullins staunchly defended the inherent supernaturalism of the Scriptures, while resisting those who wanted the Convention to take an official stance on evolution.

In relation to the authority and truthfulness of the Bible, Mullins affirmed the position essentially known as functional inerrancy, though he did not use the term. Resisting the precise formulations of the Princeton theologians, Mullins dealt with the issue by means of what he identified as an “inductive method” which affirmed the truthfulness of Scripture while acknowledging that the biblical writers “employed the language and forms of speech in common use in their own day to convey their religious message from God.”²¹ He further identified his inductivist position with James Orr, and cited Orr to affirm that the Bible “is free from demonstrable error in its statements, and harmonious in its teachings.”²²

Perhaps the most significant feature of Mullins’ thought concerning Scripture is his refusal directly to identify the Bible as revelation. This point is nuanced, but of extreme importance. The founders of Southern Seminary, in keeping with the consensus of evangelical theology, identified the Bible as God’s written revelation, inspired in a manner both verbal and complete, or “plenary.” Instead, Mullins affirmed that the Bible is the *record* of revelation. As Mullins stated: “We have in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments the record of God’s revelation of himself to his people.”²³ Elsewhere Mullins would speak of the Bible as revelation, but these statements were of a more general nature.

The lack of precision in Mullins’ position has allowed variant interpretations and reconstructions of his view. One recent interpreter judged that “The idea of inspiration played a very minor role in Mullins’ system of theology.”²⁴ Another argues that “Even though Mullins himself stopped short of arguing for the doctrine of inerrancy, it is

²¹ Mullins, *Freedom and Authority*, p. 380.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 381.

²³ E. Y. Mullins, *Christian Religion*, pp. 140-141.

²⁴ Dwight A. Moody, “The Bible,” in *Has Our Theology Changed? Southern Baptist Thought Since 1845*, ed. Paul A. Basden (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), p. 17. Moody also stated: “Mullins had virtually [sic.] nothing to say in reference to the inerrancy of Scripture” [p. 25].

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extremely doubtful that he would set himself against it.”²⁵ The very nature of Mullins’ mediating position allows for such disparate interpretations. In the “inerrancy” controversy which occurred within the Southern Baptist Convention during the 1980s and 1990s, both conservatives and moderates claimed Mullins as an ally—and both parties could supply evidence for the claim.

As has already been indicated, another feature of the new theological paradigm Mullins developed was a shift from the Calvinism of his teachers to a more modified position on doctrines such as election, atonement, and predestination. Nevertheless, Mullins remained within a generally Reformed or Calvinistic system. He continued to affirm depravity, perseverance, and unconditional election. At times, his words sound almost like Boyce, as when Mullins asserted that “God’s choice of a person is prior to that person’s choice of God, since God is infinite in wisdom and knowledge and will not make the success of the divine kingdom dependent on the contingent choices of people. God does not fling out the possibility of salvation among human beings, say, like a golden apple, and leave it for people to use or not to use as they will. God’s own hands are kept on the reins of the divine government.”²⁶

The turn of the new century brought a fervent progressivism to theology—as to virtually every other realm of thought and knowledge. Mullins was a champion of this progressivist impulse, even though he did not accept the anti-supernaturalism of the modernists. “Truth,” asserted Mullins, “does not change, but we apprehend truth with increasing clearness.”²⁷ This optimistic understanding of doctrinal progress led Mullins to believe that he could transcend the Calvinism/Arminianism controversy. Noting the “remarkable revolution” in theology during the late nineteenth century, Mullins advocated a new method and approach to theology as a discipline.

Mullins thought that this new approach, self-consciously influenced by Schleiermacher, would allow him to rise above the theological traditions and patterns of the past. He argued that “Arminianism overlooked certain essential truths about God in its strong championship of human freedom. As against it, Calvinism ran to extremes in some of its conclusions in its very earnest desire to safeguard the truth of God’s sovereignty. We are learning to discard both names and to adhere more closely than either system to the Scriptures, while retaining the truth in both systems.”²⁸

²⁵ Tom J. Nettles, “E. Y. Mullins—Reluctant Evangelical,” *Baptist Review of Theology* 5 (1995), 84.

²⁶ E. Y. Mullins, *Baptist Beliefs* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1925 [1912]), p. 26.

²⁷ Mullins, *Christian Religion*, p. vii.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

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This mediating approach left Mullins open to the charge that he attempted to resolve every theological debate by negotiating a middle position—an inherently unstable and unsatisfying method. His new paradigm also allowed Mullins to redefine certain doctrines in order to reframe long-standing traditions, including the Calvinist legacy. Concerning the doctrine of election, Mullins suggested that God chose certain persons for salvation, because of their potential influence upon other persons.²⁹ He rejected limited atonement and appeared to reject irresistible grace—at least in part because he had redefined terms of the debate. Yet, Mullins was no Arminian. His continued advocacy of election as a central doctrine of the Christian faith demonstrates his continuity with the Calvinistic tradition, even if this continuity was significantly modified.³⁰ Mullins explicitly denied that election is based upon God's foreknowledge of an individual's response of faith. He affirmed that the gospel "is efficacious with some and not efficacious with others because God's grace is operative in the one case beyond the degree of its action in the other."³¹

Clearly, the underlying issue in Mullins' shift on these issues is his theological paradigm's dependence upon the autonomous individual and his or her religious experience. Placing experience as the first principle of a theological system would necessarily shift attention away from divine sovereignty in favor of human decision.³² The free human agent becomes the focal point of theological consideration. God's sovereignty is redefined—but never denied—in order to accentuate the centrality of the human decision as an act of the religious consciousness. Schleiermacher's emphasis on religious experience over revealed knowledge so shaped Mullins' theology that, though points of continuity remained, his teachers could not have recognized their own theological system behind that of their student.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 352-253.

³⁰ This brief consideration of Mullins' theological system does not allow for a more extended treatment of his comprehensive system, which covered virtually every doctrine, except the doctrine of the church, an omission of great importance.

³¹ Mullins, *Christian Religion*, p. 343. The preceding section makes the point clear: "Does God choose men to salvation because of their good works or because he foresees they will believe when the gospel is preached to them? Beyond doubt God foresees faith. Beyond doubt faith is a condition of salvation. The question is whether it is also the ground of salvation. The Scriptures answer this question in the negative."

³² This is well described by Thomas J. Nettles: "Emphasis on human consciousness and experience so predominate in Mullins's theology that human decision and freedom eventually overshadow and crowd our effectual divine activity. This is evident in his view of Scripture, justification, and the panorama of theology, but is especially clear in his exposition of the doctrine of election." See Thomas J. Nettles, *By His Grace and For His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), p. 247.

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The focus on autonomous individualism led to another theological development which would form the central thrust of Mullins' conception of Baptist identity. Writing in his most influential book, *The Axioms of Religion*, Mullins would state his case in these words: "The sufficient statement of the historical significance of the Baptists is this: The competency of the soul in religion."³³ This notion of "soul competency" was interpreted by Mullins to mean that each individual soul is independently competent to adjudicate all matters of religious importance. "Religion," argued Mullins, "is a personal matter between the soul and God."³⁴ Mullins even described the idea in terms of "self-government in religion."³⁵

Such a conception ruled out all hierarchies and religious authorities, and led, Mullins argued, to congregationalism and democracy in the religious life. By means of this principle of soul competency, Mullins even claimed to have taken the principle of justification by faith "far beyond the dreams of Luther and other reformers."³⁶

Mullins' influence on these issues was not limited to the classroom, nor to his theological writings. His role as chairman of the committee which presented the 1925 "Baptist Faith and Message" statement as the Southern Baptist Convention's first official confession of faith furthered the process of shifting from a Calvinistic to a more modified position, indicating the shift of authority toward the individual. This was accomplished by basing the "Baptist Faith and Message" on the New Hampshire Confession of Faith rather than the Philadelphia Confession, which was more thoroughly Calvinistic.

At base, however, it was the totality of Mullins' theological system which was in large part responsible for the theological consensus which shaped the Southern Baptist Convention well into the twentieth century. That consensus would be doctrinally conservative, but the shift to a foundation in Christian experience would lead to a rugged theological individualism which would later threaten to dissolve into doctrinal ambiguity.

Timothy George notes that E. Y. Mullins "hoped that his theology would serve the cause of irenicism and denominational unity in a time of tension and schism."³⁷ In a very real sense, Mullins' new theological paradigm accomplished what he intended. But his

³³ E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1908), p. 53.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

³⁷ Timothy F. George, "Systematic Theology at Southern Seminary," *Review and Expositor*, 82 (1985), p. 39.

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emphasis on personal experience and “soul competency” would later operate to undercut the very consensus Mullins worked so hard to achieve.

MULLINS AS SOUTHERN BAPTIST LEADER

E. Y. Mullins was a prominent preacher and pastor for the nearly fifteen years prior to his election as Southern Seminary president, but his years in Baltimore and Newton Centre had taken him out of the center of Southern Baptist life. This was especially true of his Boston pastorate, for the church was not even affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. Furthermore, his brief experience with the SBC Foreign Mission Board had ended in disappointment.

Given these conditions and his cosmopolitan interests, Mullins could well have remained among northern Baptists, and would certainly have gained influence and prominence. Actually, even after his return to Southern Baptist life, Mullins would be sought for prestigious positions in the North, including posts at the University of Chicago Divinity School and Rochester Theological Seminary.

Mullins' 1899 election as president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary marked his immediate rise to the top ranks of leadership in the denomination. Established as the convention's dominant theological institution—and, at the time of Mullins' election, its only seminary—Southern's reputation and influence were carefully borne by its president.

Within the first several years of Mullins' tenure, he had delivered the convention's annual sermon and served on prominent convention committees. From the onset of the twentieth century until his death, Mullins would never be far from the center of Southern Baptist life—nor outside its highest leadership. As Albert McClellan, an astute observer of Southern Baptist life, remarked, Mullins “burst into Southern Baptist life like a comet, to burn brightly for twenty-eight years.”³⁸

Mullin's denominational prominence is evident in his chairmanship of important convention committees, his many articles published in the denominational press, his speaking at the convention's assemblies and preaching in the major pulpits of the

³⁸ Albert H. McClellan “The Leadership Heritage of Southern Baptists,” *Baptist History and Heritage*, (January 1985), p. 12. In his recent history of the Southern Baptist Convention, Jesse C. Fletcher noted: “Almost unknown to Southern Baptists when elected, Mullins preached the convention sermon in 1901 and from that time was never far from the center of convention activities. During the first three decades of the new century, few matched his influence in the defining of the denomination.” See Jesse C. Fletcher, *The Southern Baptist Convention: A Sesquicentennial History* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), p. 108.

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denomination, and his influence on younger ministers. But Mullins' full impact cannot be measured in quantifiable terms, for his greatest influence was often exercised outside official channels, where he exerted his influence through intellectual argument and persuasion.

A child of war and Reconstruction, Mullins was a southerner who clearly desired for the South to follow the lead of the North in industrialization and progressive change. He translated this goal to the Southern Baptist Convention as well, and he became the leading figure in the denomination's second great and formative generation. Mullins' generation would lead a transition of the Southern Baptist Convention from a loose assembly of churches to a powerful denomination with an executive committee, coordinated planning, a central denominational budget, and a much clearer sense of identity as a denomination.

In order to accomplish this goal, Mullins translated key commercial terms and values into denominational life. Chief among these was the ideal of "efficiency," which emphasized focus, planning, and strategic processes. Mullins was very much at home with these notions, and through his leadership he forged an alliance to press these issues throughout Southern Baptist life.

Historian Dewey Grantham suggests that "A new spirit was evident in the South during the early years of the twentieth century. After a generation of disruptive change, social disorder, and political uncertainty, southerners had reason to anticipate a more satisfying future."³⁹ Mullins wanted to pull Southern Baptists out of their legacy of Reconstruction and defeat into a new age filled with possibilities for expansion and development. In this way, Mullins functioned as a Southern Progressive—pushing for the rise of a new Southern Baptist Convention in a New South.

Mullins was driven by this vision of a new denomination for a new era. He served on the strategic "Committee on Denominational Efficiency" which dealt with both the structure and the convictions of the Southern Baptist Convention. The committee's 1914 report included a theological section written by Mullins. This statement, intended to identify denominational distinctives, was the first confessional statement adopted by the Convention.⁴⁰

³⁹ Dewey W. Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), p. 3. Grantham cites E. Y. Mullins on p. 15, fn. 34.

⁴⁰ "Pronouncement on Christian Union and Denominational Efficiency," *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention*, 1914, pp. 73-78.

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Religious liberty concerns—raised by difficulties Southern Baptists faced in ministering to soldiers during World War I—led to the establishment of a committee charged to develop a statement opposed to Christian union movements which downplayed denominational convictions. With Mullins as chairman, the committee drafted and released the “Fraternal Address of Southern Baptists” in 1920. The statement became an important hallmark of Baptist conviction, and it demonstrated Mullins’ defining influence as both theologian and denominational statesman.

This role was to be expanded in 1924, when Mullins was designated as chairman of a committee charged “to consider the advisability of issuing another statement of the Baptist faith and message.”⁴¹ Mullins fought a two-front battle during his chairmanship of this committee. Once the decision to formulate and recommend a confessional statement had been made, Mullins was pressured by conservatives, who wanted issues such as evolution addressed in the statement, and by non-confessionals, who would fight any confession put forth.

Mullins led the committee to adopt and recommend a revised version of the New Hampshire Confession (1833) rather than the more Calvinistic Philadelphia Confession of Faith (1742).⁴² Though the New Hampshire confession did not reject any Calvinistic doctrine, it attenuated and modified these convictions in a way the suited both Mullins and the populist character of the denomination in the 1920s.

Serving as president of the Southern Baptist Convention from 1921 to 1924, Mullins charted a course which he felt would maintain theological convictions, while remaining open to new developments. His tenure as convention president coincided with the fundamentalist-modernist controversy then raging in the northern denominations, and the less momentous, but still critical controversies that shaped Southern Baptist life during the early 1920s.

The mediating course Mullins charted for himself—and for the denomination—led him to avoid including any reference to evolution in the “Baptist Faith and Message” statement, but he did make a clear statement through a statement on “Science and Religion” appended to the committee’s report and made a part of Mullins’ presidential address in 1923.⁴³ In this statement Mullins called for “unwavering adherence to the supernatural

⁴¹ *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention*, 1924, p. 95. Thus, the name chosen for the confession of faith adopted in 1925, “The Baptist Faith and Message,” was taken directly from the motion establishing the committee in 1924.

⁴² For the text of these confessions, see *Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms*, “Library of Baptist Classics, ed. Timothy and Denise George (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996).

⁴³ E. Y. Mullins, “The Dangers and Duties of the Present Hour,” pamphlet published in 1923.

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elements in the Christian religion.”⁴⁴ Affirming the very doctrines rejected by the modernists, the statement affirmed the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, the historicity of the miracles, the bodily resurrection, vicarious atonement, and the bodily return of Christ in glory.

Furthermore, the statement affirmed “freedom of research” for teachers in Baptist schools, but warned that “. . . we do insist upon a positive content of faith in accordance with the preceding statement as a qualification for acceptable service in Baptist schools.”⁴⁵

With focus and force, the statement concluded: “The supreme issue today is between naturalism and supernaturalism. We stand unalterably for the supernatural in Christianity. Teachers in our schools should be careful to free themselves from any suspicion of disloyalty on this point. In the present period of agitation and unrest they are obligated to make their position clear. We pledge our support to all schools and teachers who are thus loyal to the facts of Christianity as revealed in the Scriptures.”⁴⁶

Though controversies continued, the “Baptist Faith and Message” became a central representation of the denominational consensus which developed during the early years of the twentieth century. To a remarkable degree, this denominational consensus was the work and legacy of Edgar Young Mullins. More than any Baptist of the era, Mullins was able to define the issues, assert his own influence, and create a majoritarian compromise, even when the issues remained at least partially unresolved.

The denominational consensus forged in the early decades of the twentieth century lasted well into the years following World War II. The adoption of the “Baptist Faith and Message,” as well as the development of the Cooperative Program and the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, helped forge this consensus, and helped to grant theological stability to the growing denomination.

Mullins’ legacy as denominational statesman extended beyond the Southern Baptist Convention, however. His influence was determinative in the development of the Baptist World Alliance as a world-wide fellowship of Baptists. His role as a bridge between northern and southern Baptists was also critical as the two conventions shifted from separation to competition.

Throughout his ministry, Mullins considered his Baptist identity to be central to his personal identity. His climactic declaration of Baptist principles, *The Axioms of Religion*,

⁴⁴ Robert A. Baker, ed., *A Baptist Sourcebook: With Particular Reference to Southern Baptists* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1966), p. 205.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

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was as much a personal anthem as a denominational interpretation. More than any other individual, E. Y. Mullins shaped the Southern Baptist mind during the first half of the twentieth century.

MULLINS AS SEMINARY PRESIDENT

By 1899, Southern Seminary had established a national reputation for academic rigor and had developed support adequate to face a promising future. But the turmoil and crisis of the Whitsitt years had taken a toll, and the seminary was in danger of losing credibility in some denominational circles.

Further, rumblings of a new seminary to be established in Texas represented a new threat to Southern Seminary's solitary place in the Southern Baptist heart—and offering plate. Soon after taking office, Mullins set out to regain ground lost to the seminary during the recent controversy.

His mediating purpose was soon evident as Mullins worked within the institution to rebuild the faculty and externally to establish and nurture critical support. The faculty Mullins called together was so young that some called the teachers "Mullins' Boys Brigade." The curriculum was slowly changed to meet the needs of the modern ministry, and the complexities of ministerial specialization. Early programs in religious education (Sunday School pedagogy) and world missions drew students and expanded the seminary's prestige and influence.

Mullins also redefined the role of the president. Until the closing years of his life, Boyce had been merely Chairman of the Faculty and Professor of Theology. In an official sense, at least, Boyce was first among equals. Mullins transformed the office and functioned as chief executive—a fact that clearly rankled some of the faculty.

Familiar with developments in the business world, and conscious of the growing complexity of the president's role, Mullins single-handedly asserted executive authority and represented the seminary to both the denomination and the larger world. During most of his presidency, the identities of Mullins and his beloved seminary were effectively merged.

The relocation of the seminary to a new campus on Lexington Road was Mullins' last great project. Aware that the downtown campus could not be sufficiently modernized or expanded, Mullins put his full force and authority behind the risky and expansive move. The wisdom of his vision was verified over the next several decades, as the beauty and utility of the stately campus grew. But his vision—largely built with borrowed funds—

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almost brought the seminary to ruin, when after his death the Great Depression led the seminary to the brink of financial default.

The legacy of E. Y. Mullins to Southern Seminary is beyond calculation. His leadership through years of crisis and controversy and his vision to make the school a world-class institution propelled and influenced the seminary well after his death.

MULLINS IN RETROSPECT

Historian John Milton Cooper, Jr. has reflected that, for America, “the first two decades of the twentieth century marked a turning point. During these twenty years a political, economic, social, and cultural agenda was set that still dominates American life as we enter the century’s final decade.”⁴⁷ In a similar manner, a theological agenda was set as well.

For Southern Baptists, that agenda was largely set by one man—Edgar Young Mullins. Though he was assisted (and sometimes opposed) by other Baptist luminaries such as B. H. Carroll, Lee Scarborough, and George W. Truett, Mullins was more influential than any other individual as Southern Baptists negotiated the turbulent early decades of the twentieth century.

He was a man incredibly well fitted for his times. An individualist by nature, he came to prominence as individualism was openly celebrated and ideologically supported. An institutionalist by calling, he came to denominational leadership as the great wave of progressivist organizationalism swept the nation. A theological educator by assignment, Mullins took a nineteenth century theological seminary and brought it to the forefront of developments brought with the new century.

Mullins—more than any other writing theologian among Southern Baptists—remains the one figure against whom almost any other theologian is compared. His legacy continues to the present, and his tradition is claimed by persons and movements with divergent theological approaches and variant understandings of Mullins’ intention.

What is the Mullins legacy? Historian Martin E. Marty sees Mullins as Southern Baptists’ “most thoughtful theologian,” but a figure hopelessly mired in a southern form of culture-Protestantism.⁴⁸ Literary critic Harold Bloom identified Mullins as “the most

⁴⁷ John Milton Cooper, Jr., *Pivotal Decades: The United States, 1900-1920* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), p. xiii.

⁴⁸ Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion*, Vol. 2, “The Noise of Conflict 1919-1941,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 206.

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neglected of major American theologians,” and “the Calvin or Luther or Wesley of the Southern Baptists.”⁴⁹

For Bloom, who argues that Americans are prone to a Gnosticism through self-worship. Mullins is the pioneer of the Southern Baptist tradition taken up by moderates in the inerrancy controversy, “the definer of their creedless faith.”⁵⁰ According to Bloom, Mullins’ doctrine of soul competency so focuses all meaning and truth in the autonomous individual—“sanctioning endless interpretive possibilities”—that all religious authority is vaporized, even the authority of Scripture.⁵¹

Mullins has been portrayed as a bold progressivist seeking to bring enlightenment to Southern Baptists, but thwarted by insularity and conservative opposition; and as a calculating denominational politician, who changed his colors in order to save his seminary and his personal leadership.

Russell Dilday, former president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, judged Mullins to be a unique Southern Baptist apologist, whose “views were instrumental in settling controversies and were even adopted by other groups such as the Northern Baptists.”⁵² Dilday also claimed Mullins for SBC moderates—those of the 1980s as well as the 1920s. At the height of the SBC inerrancy controversy, Dilday argued that Mullins’ “scholarly, conservative centrist method of dealing with [controversial issues] provides a timely model for present denominational leaders. His method represents the unique theological approach which has historically characterized mainstream Baptist life through the years.”⁵³

A similar approach is taken by Bill J. Leonard, who argued that E. Y. Mullins “personifies the Grand Compromise that characterized the SBC throughout most of the twentieth century.”⁵⁴ Leonard continued: “As few other Southern Baptist leaders, Mullins

⁴⁹ Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), p. 199.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 206.

⁵² Russell Hooper Dilday, “The Apologetic Method of E. Y. Mullins,” unpublished Th.D. dissertation, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1960, p. 5.

⁵³ Russell H. Dilday, “E. Y. Mullins: Shaper of Theology,” Pamphlet published in the “Shapers of Southern Baptist Heritage” series, (Nashville: Historical Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1987), n.p.

⁵⁴ Bill J. Leonard, *God’s Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 49.

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represented the nature of denominational compromise. In his role as preacher, professor, and theologian he helped shape Southern Baptist public, if not popular, theology."⁵⁵

In Leonard's estimation, Mullins stands as the master of a theological compromise which enabled Southern Baptists to emerge from the controversies of the 1920s without breaking apart. Leonard acknowledges that Mullins was a complex figure, whose theology "was constructed in a denomination founded on precarious compromise."⁵⁶ Moderate historians have been champions of Mullins' emphasis on religious liberty and soul competency, but reluctant to advocate some of his more conservative doctrinal affirmations and his role in establishing the "Baptist Faith and Message."

On the other hand, Southern Baptist conservatives have also laid claim to Mullins' legacy, but with equal unease. Russ Bush and Thomas J. Nettles argue that Mullins stood almost alone in terms of influence among Southern Baptist leaders of his day, but his influence has primarily been the infusion of pragmatism into Southern Baptist theology. Nevertheless, Bush and Nettles resist efforts to blame Mullins for the shallowness of much contemporary modern Baptist theology: "Whether or not Mullins can be faulted as being the root source of the shallowness of experientialist theology among some Baptists, it is certainly not correct to read that modern approach back into Mullins himself."⁵⁷

Clearly, Mullins' greatness as a figure in Southern Baptist history is secure. He stands as the epitome of his generation—the Transitional Generation—in Southern Baptist development. Largely as a result of his efforts and leadership, Southern Baptists emerged in the twentieth century as a vital, growing, and ambitious denomination. By the time of Mullins' death, Southern Baptists had left their lack of direction during Reconstruction and its aftermath far behind, and faced the new century with a boldness hardly imaginable as the nineteenth century ended.

That Mullins stands as a model of denominational leadership for so many modern Baptists should not come as a surprise. His stately demeanor, impressive appearance, stately bearing, scholarly attainments, and gifted leadership would place him at the forefront of any generation.

In the end, however, Mullins' denominational leadership and place in Baptist history cannot be severed from his theological legacy. This evaluation is far more complicated, and more contested.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 51.

⁵⁷ Russ Bush and Thomas J. Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 296.

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The central thrust of E. Y. Mullins' theological legacy is his focus on individual experience. Whatever his intention, this massive methodological shift in theology set the stage for doctrinal ambiguity and theological minimalism. The compromise Mullins sought to forge in the 1920s was significantly altered by later generations, with personal experience inevitably gaining ground at the expense of revealed truth.

Once the autonomous individual is made the central authority in matters of theology—a move made necessary by Mullins' emphasis on religious experience—the authority of Scripture becomes secondary at best, regardless of what may be claimed in honor of Scripture's preeminence. Either personal experience will be submitted to revelation, or revelation will be submitted to personal experience. There is no escape from this theological dilemma, and every theologian must choose between these two methodological options. The full consequences of a shift in theological method may take generations to appear, but by the 1960s most Southern Baptists were aware of a growing theological divide within the denomination, and especially its seminaries.

Mullins greeted the new philosophical currents of his day with enthusiasm. Pragmatism and Personalism were particularly attractive to Mullins, and both were grafted into his theological method. But Pragmatism is an unstable basis for religious experience, much less religious authority. Pragmatism's test of truthfulness leads to relativism, for personal experience is diverse by its very nature. Personalism, on the other hand, is dangerously reductionistic, denying the importance (if not the existence) of any truth not rooted in personality.

The influence of Schleiermacher is also problematic. Schleiermacher's theological revolution swiftly became Protestant liberalism, with the supernatural elements of the faith discarded because they were not required by religious experience. Though Mullins was no liberal in terms of doctrine, he stood near the liberals in terms of method. The generations to follow would be tempted to make the shift in doctrine, as well as method.⁵⁸

Mullins' attempt to forge a mediating theological paradigm for Southern Baptists eventually failed because mediating positions are inherently unstable. Delicate compromises established in one generation are often abandoned in short order as new generations assume leadership.

⁵⁸ Mullins' engagement with Schleiermacher is complex. Though he acknowledged and demonstrated Schleiermacher's influence in his *Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression* (1917), in *Freedom and Authority in Religion* (1912) he rejected Schleiermacher's subjectivism as "inadequate for the religious life of man, although it sprang from a high motive and sought to revitalize a decadent Christianity" (p, 6).

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The emphasis on soul competency is, as Mullins must have both hoped and expected, the most enduring element of Mullins' legacy. The concept does underscore the necessity of personal religious experience—including repentance and faith—to the Christian life. But soul competency also serves as an acid dissolving religious authority, congregationalism, confessionalism, and mutual theological accountability. This, too, is part of Mullins' legacy. As American Baptist church historian Winthrop S. Hudson asserted: "The practical effect of the stress upon 'soul competency' as the cardinal doctrine of the Baptists was to make every man's hat his own church."⁵⁹

Thus, E. Y. Mullins stands as one of the most important figures in Baptist history, and a figure who raises some of the most important questions facing contemporary Baptists. He deserves our historical appreciation and respect, and our most careful consideration and analysis.

CONTENTS OF THIS VOLUME

Part I of this volume consists of *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith*, published in 1908. For a generation of students at Southern Seminary and several other schools, Mullins was well known through the use of his *Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression* as a textbook. Nevertheless, outside the seminary classroom, Mullins was best known through his *Axioms* volume.

Faced with numerous opportunities to interpret Baptist identity, Mullins believed that a new interpretation was needed, timed to meet the needs of the early twentieth century. His purpose was to interpret Baptists to the world and to assist Baptists in the development of a world-wide sense of denominational identity.

Mullins was convinced that Baptists were generally known by outsiders for convictions and practices concerning church government, baptism, and congregationalism. In sum, he was concerned that Baptists were known more for what they reject (ecclesiastical hierarchies, infant baptism, inter-denominational union, etc.), than for what they affirm out of their deepest convictions.

⁵⁹ Winthrop S. Hudson, *Baptists in Transition: Individualism and Christian Responsibility* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1979), p. 142. In a significant development, a group of moderate Southern Baptist academics has released a statement which includes a charge that Mullins "embraced modernity by defining freedom in terms of the Enlightenment notions of autonomous moral agency and objective rationality." See "Re-envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America" (1997).

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The great central concept Mullins declared to be the “historical significance of the Baptists” was soul competency, and the *Axioms* may be read as an attempt to explicate the full meaning of soul competency applied comprehensively.

Mullins identified the Axioms of Religion as follows:

1. The theological axiom: The holy and loving God has a right to be sovereign.
2. The religious axiom: All souls have an equal right to direct access to God.
3. The ecclesiastical axiom: All believers have a right to equal privileges in the Church.
4. The moral axiom: To be responsible man must be free.
5. The religio-civic axiom: A free church in a free state.
6. The social axiom: Love your neighbor as yourself.⁶⁰

The chapters of the book demonstrate the shape of Mullins’ interpretation of Baptist identity and his conception of the Baptist principle.

Part II includes a selection of articles, occasional pieces, and speeches representing the contribution of E. Y. Mullins to the Baptist tradition. These selections were chosen out of the massive body of written material Mullins prepared and published during his lifetime.

“**The Dangers and Duties of the Present Hour**” was Mullins’ opening address as president of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1923. Mullins reviewed issues then current in Southern Baptist life, including the course of the campaign to raise \$75,000,000 for denominational causes. The most important sections of this address deal with theological issues. Mullins feared that the convention would divide over the evolution issue. His “Statement on Science and Religion” included in this message was officially adopted by the convention.

“**Baptists and Creeds**” is an essay discovered in the “E. Y. Mullins Collection” located in the archives of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Most likely written between 1920-1925, Mullins rejects the argument that Baptists have always been a non-creedal people. The essay is an ardent defense of Baptist confessionalism, and a warning against

⁶⁰ We should note that Mullins added a seventh axiom in a later article. This new axiom, he identified as “The Civic Axiom: The sovereignty of the State resides in the citizen.” See E. Y. Mullins, “Why I am a Baptist,” *Forum* (May 1926), p. 732. Written almost twenty years after the publication of *Axioms*, this indicates Mullins’ increasing concern for the spread of democracy around the world. Mullins had been sensitized to the reality of religious persecution through his service as president of the Baptist World Alliance.

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hasty or ill-advised creedal revision. With evident concern, Mullins argued that Baptists should “clear the atmosphere and learn where we are drifting.”

“**The Jesus of Liberal Theology**” provided Mullins with an opportunity to defend classical Christologies against the radical anti-supernaturalism of the liberals. First published in the April 1915 issue of *Review and Expositor*, the theological journal Mullins brought to Southern Seminary, the article addresses issues still current in theological debate.

“**The Response of Jesus Christ to Modern Thought**” is one of Mullins’ most unusual articles. In this selection, first published in the April 1916 issue of *Review and Expositor*, Mullins imagines how Jesus would respond to current movements in philosophical thought, such as idealistic Personalism and Pragmatism His conclusion: “Jesus meets and matches the autonomy of science and philosophy with the autonomy of religion.”

“**Christianity in the Modern World**” is based on Mullins’ 1925 convocation address to students and faculty at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. The article is perhaps the most concise introduction to Mullins’ apologetic method. He defends the Christian faith against the modernists by insisting on the “facts” supporting the Christian worldview. Mullins also insists that Christianity must rise to meet the challenge of new movements in thought. The address was published in the October 1925 issue of *Review and Expositor*.

“**Is Jesus Christ the Author of Religious Experience?**” was Mullins’ answer to the challenge set by William James and the new philosophy of Pragmatism. Mullins argues that “The Christian norm of experience not only gives a rational account of itself, but it can rationally account for the failure of other forms of religious evangelism.” The article demonstrates Mullins’ confidence that Christianity can be defended and asserted on the philosophical grounds established by Pragmatism. The selection was published in the first volume of *Review and Expositor* (1905).

“**The Theological Trend**” is Mullins’ programmatic address to the 1905 Baptist World Congress, held in London. Aware of theological and philosophical trends current in the academy, Mullins called for Baptists worldwide to join in theological reconstruction in order to confront the apologetic task. This selection was published in the second volume of *Review and Expositor* (1906).

“**The Statement on Science and Religion**” was Mullins’ defense and explanation of his statement adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1923, and appended to the “Baptist Faith and Message” report in 1925. The article was the first of three which

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Mullins prepared for the denominational press. This selection was published in the July 16, 1925 edition of *The Christian Index*, newsjournal of the Georgia Baptist Convention.

“Why I Am a Baptist” was written for a national secular readership just after Mullins had completed his terms of service as president of the Southern Baptist Convention and as he continued his tenure as president of the Baptist World Alliance. He defends his Baptist identity on both spiritual and rational grounds, and repeats his six “axioms of religion,” while adding a seventh. The essay first appeared in *The Forum*, 75 (May 1926).

“A True Denominationalism” describes Mullins’ conception of Baptist identity against the competing claims of other denominations. Published by the Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, the pamphlet was probably intended for use during the \$75,000,000 campaign. Mullins calls for conviction, conscience, and the financial support of the denomination.

“Baptist Theology in the New World Order” was written in the aftermath of World War I—a war promised to be “the war to end all wars.” With the war a recent memory, Mullins pointed to a “new world order” and called for Baptists to take their place of leadership, especially in the arena of theology. Mullins was confident that the Baptist affirmation of personal religious experience and religious liberty would serve the denomination well. He also warned against the development of a new cultural Christianity in the wake of the fall of the old order. The article first appeared in *Review and Expositor*, vol. 17 (1925).

“Inaugural Address: President E. Y. Mullins” was Mullins’ first major statement of his vision and purpose as he assumed office as president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1899. The new president affirmed that the seminary must remain “anchored to the great and eternal realities and triumphant certainties of doctrine” as well as committed to “the truest and best Christian scholarship.” The address was published as a pamphlet and widely distributed, and was also published in the November 1899 edition of *The Seminary Magazine*.

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