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D. G. Hart

DEFENDING THE FAITH

J. Gresham Machen and the
Crisis of Conservative Protestantism
in Modern America
TO ANNIE
CONTENTS

Preface ix
Acknowledgments xi

Introduction.
Religion and Cultural Modernism in America 1
1. Between Culture and Piety 10
2. The Double-edged Sword of Biblical Criticism 35
3. Highbrow Fundamentalism 59
4. Science and Salvation 84
5. A Question of Character 108
6. The Responsibility of the Church in the New Age 133

Epilogue.
Confessional Protestantism in Modern America:
The Legacy of J. Gresham Machen 160

Notes 171
Bibliographic Essay 209
Index 219
This book is about J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937), the scion of a prominent and genteel Baltimore family, who studied at the finest American and European universities and, while teaching at Princeton Seminary, went on to become one of the United States’s leading authorities in New Testament studies. This side of Machen’s life is not as well known as his involvement in the fundamentalist controversy of the 1920s. A devout Presbyterian, Machen railed against the infidelities of theological modernists and eventually left the Protestant establishment to found a new seminary and denomination.

This capsule summary of Machen’s career highlights a number of anomalies that make him an interesting object for study. He was known as a gentleman and a scholar, two traits not associated with the militancy, stridency, and populism of fundamentalism even in recent revisionist accounts of the movement.

Explaining how a privileged and learned Protestant became embroiled in the religious disputes of the 1920s is one purpose of this book. To understand Machen’s involvement in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, we need to locate the religious conflict over America’s churches and schools in the broader intellectual and cultural climate of the 1920s, a climate that cultivated dissatisfaction with the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant ethos of American culture generally and the tenor of Protestant church life specifically. A variety of conservative intellectuals, from the New Humanists to the Southern Agrarians, denounced the modernizing drift of mainstream Protestantism. Machen’s criticism of liberal Protestantism echoed many of these complaints. To be sure, he attracted a following within fundamentalist
circles—one that had all but dried up by the time of his premature death in 1937. But his attraction for fundamentalists should not obscure Machen’s identity as a conservative intellectual who opposed religious modernism for reasons having as much to do with his academic training and social background as with his Presbyterian convictions. Nor should it conceal his identity as a Presbyterian traditionalist who championed Calvinistic creeds and Reformed patterns of church government against the innovations of fundamentalists and modernists alike.

A further anomaly about Machen was the way his critique of mainstream Protestantism was received by secular intellectuals. The support he garnered from prominent members of the liberal intelligentsia, a surprising twist in the fundamentalist controversy, reveals a puzzling and limited but nonetheless genuine alliance during the 1920s between orthodox belief and secularism. Machen was by no means representative on this score, but his critique of liberal Protestantism was a religious expression of the post–World War I attack upon America’s religious and cultural establishment, what one historian has called “the rebellion against Victorianism.” Of course, Machen’s reasons for opposing the Protestant establishment differed from those of secularists. Nevertheless, unlike fundamentalist and modernist Protestants, Machen fully rejected the hope of building a Christian civilization in America and so found himself on the same side with other secular intellectuals in many of the cultural conflicts of the 1920s.

A study of Machen’s thought and career, therefore, has much to tell us not just about the issues that unsettled—some would say unseated—mainstream Protestantism’s hold on American intellectual and cultural life. But it also offers a distinctive and revealing perspective on the way we have come to assess and locate religion, science, and modernity in the early twentieth century.
I began this book in 1985. Since that time my dear wife, Ann, has been a constant source of support, encouragement, and good sense. Her affection has tempered the disappointments and enriched the satisfactions of academic life. As a partial payment I dedicate this to her.

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Introduction

Religion and Cultural Modernism
in America

By most accounts, the post-World War I era in American history witnessed the splintering of religion from cultural and intellectual life. According to one recent assessment, intellectuals in the 1920s came to regard religion as "alien to their endeavors" because the prevailing outlook among intellectuals was "cosmopolitan and irreligious." This verdict only repeats what contemporaries believed. More than sixty years ago, in 1931, describing the "revolt of the highbrows," Frederick Lewis Allen summarized the credo of the country's writers, artists, and intellectuals. These restless souls promoted sexual freedom, defied propriety, opposed Prohibition, took pleasure in overturning popular idols, and in general were "religious skeptics." "Never before," Allen wrote, "had so many books addressed to the thinking public assumed at the outset that their readers had rejected the old theology." The "chief tom tom beater" of this cultural offensive, in Allen's judgment, was the Baltimore journalist and editor H. L. Mencken, for whom rebellion was the breath of life. Mencken derided almost every convention of America's middle class, from "the religion of Coolidge Prosperity" to the sentimentality and idealism of polite literature. According to Walter Lippmann, himself an important member of America's secular intelligentsia, Mencken was "the most powerful personal influence" on a whole generation of educated people.¹

What Allen failed to recognize was that, despite the highbrows' antipathy toward religion, the void created by the lapsing of belief still absorbed the attention of many intellectuals, including Mencken and Lippmann. Just before the appearance of Allen's Only Yesterday, for instance, Lippmann published A Preface to Morals (1929) and Mencken
followed with *A Treatise on the Gods* (1930). To be sure, neither Lippmann nor Mencken embraced the Protestant values that theretofore had dominated American culture and institutions. Yet both authors confronted directly what they considered a central problem in modern American society, namely, the loss of traditional beliefs in the face of widespread cultural change. For Lippmann, the problem of modern unbelief was without precedent. "This is the first age," he wrote, "when the circumstances of life have conspired with the intellectual habits of the time to render any fixed and authoritative belief incredible to large masses of men." This predicament haunted Lippmann for it meant that "whirl [was] king" and that modern men and women no longer possessed certain foundations for moral and spiritual ideals. Debunker that he was, Mencken was less troubled than Lippmann by the loss of religious certainty and more eager to mock the superstitions still prevalent in rural America. Nevertheless, even Mencken sounded at least a trifle concerned about the skepticism embraced by the educated. "What survives under the name of Christianity, above the stratum of the mob, is no more than a sort of Humanism with little more supernaturalism in it than you will find in mathematics or political economy."

Such words, though betraying anxiety about the loss of religion, were hardly consoling to the leaders of America's Protestant churches. For almost a half century theologians and clergy of various denominations had been overhauling Protestant beliefs, hoping to appropriate new directions in the intellectual world in order to preserve the allegiance of the very people for whom Mencken and Lippmann professed to speak. Now they were being told that the whole project of refashioning Christianity in modern garb had failed. Reactions to Mencken and Lippmann from prominent Protestants were predictable. Reinhold Niebuhr dismissed Mencken for telling "little more than how one fanatic feels about other fanatics of a different type." Lippmann provoked a deeper response. George A. Gordon, a prominent Boston Congregationalist, complained that Lippmann had "everywhere overdone" the modern loss of certainty. Meanwhile, the popular preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick was irritated enough by Lippmann to accuse him of being a closet fundamentalist. The only religion Lippmann could understand, Fosdick snapped, was "the most naive and medieval sort"; Lippmann was not "at home with any intelligent religion since the Deism of the eighteenth century went to pieces."

Fosdick's rejoinder to Lippmann touched a little noticed irony that accompanied the breach between religious leaders and intellectuals during the 1920s. One stimulus to books such as Lippmann's and Mencken's was their perception that modern Protestantism was intel-
lectually bankrupt. According to Lippmann, the faith of mainstream Protestants was incapable of supplying the certainty modern culture needed. "Something quite fundamental is left out of the modernist creeds," he wrote. They reject revelation, the authority of any particular church, and the inspiration of the Bible. In sum, modern Protestants had lost the conviction "that religion comes from God." Mencken spoke in similar terms. The effort to reconcile Protestantism and modern learning had reduced Christianity to "a vague sort of good will to men" with little more clout in the wider world than abstract notions such as "justice" or nostalgic claims about the love of God. The irony in such criticisms, as Fosdick perceived, was that Lippmann and Mencken, themselves resolutely modern, were echoing the opinions of Protestant fundamentalists. By faulting the leaders of Protestant churches for abandoning the traditional, if unfashionable, tenets of Christianity, secular intellectuals were in fact advancing the fundamentalist argument that Protestant modernism compared poorly with historic, doctrinal Christianity.4

The possibility that America's secular intelligentsia might join Protestant fundamentalists in a wartime alliance against mainstream Protestantism now sounds farfetched. At the time, however, it was not, for in mounting their attack on modernizing Protestantism Lippmann and Mencken both cited with approval the opinions of the fervent fundamentalist J. Gresham Machen. Machen, a respected New Testament scholar and professor since 1906 at the "West Point of Presbyterian orthodoxy," Princeton Theological Seminary, had come to the attention of these cultural savants because of his outspoken opposition to Protestant liberalism. To Lippmann and Mencken, Machen, though he spoke from the opposite end of the religious spectrum, had yet made criticisms of liberal Protestantism that they found cogent. Machen had become something of a celebrity with the publication in 1923 of his book *Christianity and Liberalism*. There he argued that by denying the supernatural character of Christianity liberal Protestants had actually created an entirely new religion. It was precisely this argument that Lippmann praised in *A Preface to Morals* for its "acumen," "saliency," and "wit." For Lippmann, Machen had provided a "cool and stringent" defense of traditional Protestantism, "the best popular argument" produced by either fundamentalists or liberals in a decade of religious turmoil. Mencken was no less impressed. To readers of the *American Mercury* he introduced the person he would later dub "Doctor Fundamentalis" as "a man of great learning and dignity—a former student at European universities, the author of various valuable books, ... and a member of several societies of savants."5

In this instance, at least, Mencken had abandoned hyperbole for
straight journalism, for Machen was decidedly not a typical fundamentalist. He had trained at Johns Hopkins University, Princeton Seminary, Princeton University, and the German universities of Marburg and Göttingen. Through his involvement in Presbyterian controversies of the 1920s he had earned a reputation as the nation’s most learned and articulate defender of traditional Protestantism. But Mencken’s respect went beyond Machen’s credentials to his argument, which the journalist judged was “completely impregnable.” “If he is wrong,” Mencken wrote, “then the science of logic is a hollow vanity, signifying nothing.”

The way in which both Lippmann and Mencken exempted Machen from their otherwise dismissive critique of twentieth-century Protestantism poses an important question. How could Machen’s religious and cultural convictions serve both as ammunition for “modernists” to criticize the mainstream church and as a foundation from which to defend Protestant orthodoxy? The lengthy parade of anomalies in Machen’s career makes this question even more pressing. These quirks may even extend so far as to suggest that religion and modern culture in the early twentieth century were more complicated than has been assumed.

In the Presbyterian Church Machen wanted to enforce strictly the details of Calvinist orthodoxy, yet in society he was an ardent libertarian who opposed the efforts of government to impose anything.

His published writings defended the historical reliability of the New Testament, yet Machen also championed the methods of modern biblical scholarship.

He opposed the secularization of life in America, yet did not oppose the teaching of evolution.

He railed against the biblical scholarship of mainstream Protestantism, yet published with an established New York firm a grammar of New Testament Greek that was used widely at the institutions of his religious foes.

Like conventional fundamentalists, Machen opposed the growth of the federal government, but very much unlike his fellow fundamentalists he attacked Prohibition.

Like later fundamentalists Machen advocated private Christian schools, yet unlike many later fundamentalists he opposed Bible reading and prayer in public schools.
Machen, like other Southern Protestants, was a segregationist who opposed the admission of black students to Princeton Seminary, yet as a proponent of cultural pluralism he championed bilingual primary and secondary school education in ethnic communities.

Like other fundamentalists, he opposed women’s suffrage, but at the same time, unlike Northern Protestants, Machen was a life-long member of the Democratic party; and in 1928 he was one of the few Protestants, Northern or Southern, to vote for the first Roman Catholic presidential candidate, Al Smith.

In sum, while Machen stood with other fundamentalists in reprobating many features of modern society, on a surprising number of questions his views allied him more closely with modernist intellectuals such as Lippmann and Mencken who scorned the vapidity of mainstream Protestantism in American culture and who otherwise were far removed from Machen’s theology. To observe the selected affinities between Machen and particular secular intellectuals is, in the first place, to gain a better understanding of the thought and career of fundamentalism’s lone scholar. It is also a way to see more clearly the meaning of the “modernism” that came to prevail among American intellectuals in the 1920s.

To be sure, standard evaluations of Machen in surveys of American religion are not entirely misguided when they feature his reactionary character as a fundamentalist. Machen’s theological strictures against liberal Protestantism, though informed by rigorous scholarship, were in many ways only learned variations of fundamentalist biblical literalism. With other fundamentalists, he condemned liberal Protestant efforts to adapt traditional interpretations of holy writ to the broader intellectual and cultural changes that had transformed America from a rural, agricultural, and religiously oriented society to one dominated by cities, industrialization, and science. Machen’s long association with Princeton Seminary, the institution whose theologians provided fundamentalists with reasoned arguments for the historical reliability of scripture, makes it natural to regard him simply as a fundamentalist distinguished only by academic polish. Perceived in these terms, it seems entirely appropriate to fit Machen neatly into one of the standard categories for early twentieth-century Protestantism. He seems to belong securely with “the party of the past” that stoutly defended traditional Protestant verities against all comers, whether academic innovations of German higher critics or popular adjustments to the old faith from Protestant pulpiteers.
In such a view, Machen’s religious convictions pose no difficulty for standard treatments of the relationship between fundamentalism and modern American culture. Although definitions of cultural modernism abound, most of them stress an inherent antagonism between religion and modernity, an intellectual conflict where the certitudes of faith give way to the uncertainties of modern existence. The modern outlook of the early twentieth century, most historians and literary scholars concede, featured a frank recognition that the world and our experience of it are never fixed or complete but forever haunted by flux and uncertainty. According to Daniel Joseph Singal, the modernist worldview begins with the premise of "an unpredictable universe" where nothing is stable and human knowledge is "partial and transient at best." In such a universe, absolute systems must make way for values that adapt continuously to "changing historical circumstances." In sum, modernists wanted "to know 'reality' in all its depth and complexity," even as they recognized that such knowledge ended in paradox or pain.⁷

While modernism of this sort found vivid expression in literature and art that plumbed the depths of uncertainty, it did not develop independently of academic or scientific pursuits. In fact, literary and artistic modernism resonated with the biology of Charles Darwin, the philosophy of William James and John Dewey, the anthropology of Franz Boas, the "new" history of James Harvey Robinson and Charles Beard, the physics of Albert Einstein, and the religious historicism of the University of Chicago’s Shirley Jackson Case and Shailer Mathews, all of which expressed reservations about the abstract certainties of Victorian intellectual life.⁸

In this reading, cultural modernism and its intellectual antecedents clashed with traditional religious faith. And of all traditionalist faiths, Protestant fundamentalism collided most directly with the new way of understanding the world. Fundamentalist protests against Darwinism as well as conservative notions about the Bible could not have been more contrary to modernist notions about historical development and metaphysical uncertainty. One of the reasons, then, why fundamentalists were, in the words of one historian, "losing a battle of prestige . . . in America’s best known centers of learning" was because their mental habits were becoming marginal within a "modern" academy and a broader culture shaped by the "modernist" outlook.⁹

This simple (and not entirely unfounded) picture of religion and "modernity" in the early twentieth century becomes more complicated, however, when we examine the relationship between liberal Protestantism and the concerns of modernist writers and intellectuals. On the one hand, specific liberal Protestant notions, such as the con-
viction that the truth of religious beliefs was relative to time and place, or the desire to adapt Christian faith to modern science, did reflect features of cultural modernism. Thus, it came about that the term modernism was applied to theological liberals even before it was used in artistic and literary circles because these Protestants seemed to be clearing the same path that cultural modernists later followed. On the other hand, the use of a common adjective to describe both "modernist" Protestants and "modernist" intellectuals creates confusion. Except for the most radical fringe of Protestant "modernists," mainstream and liberal Protestants only sought adjustments to traditional Christianity. They wanted to preserve historic Protestant certainties and the privileged position of Protestantism in American culture. They thought they could reach this goal with tactical adaptations of the historic faith. Cultural modernism, by contrast, according to David Hollinger, was "resoundingly post-Biblical" and rejected inherited religious authority. Liberal Protestantism's confidence in a benevolent God and its optimism about finding a lasting solution to the problems of modern society were "distant" from the intents of modernist writers and intellectuals. In this latter understanding, if modernist sensibilities about the recalcitrant nature of the universe became as dominant within intellectual circles as some argue, liberal Protestantism was just as marginal as fundamentalism to modernist culture in America. More recently, religious historians have suggested as much when they describe the 1920s as a time of Protestantism's "second disestablishment," a period when the old-line denominations' efforts to maintain their hold on American life and thought collapsed.10

Even though "cultural modernism" may have in the 1920s passed "Protestant modernism" by, the liberal Protestant denominations that comprised the Federal Council of Churches were still firmly entrenched in powerful institutions and organizations. To be sure, their establishment was no longer complete; they did not speak for several large groups of other Protestants, and their actual authority did unravel as the century progressed. Nonetheless, mainstream Protestantism, the wing of American Christianity that adjusted its faith in a "modern" direction (though stopping far short of cultural "modernism"), continued to enjoy considerable religious and cultural authority. Against religious critics and cultural modernists, the Protestant mainstream still strove to define American society's moral outlook, articulate the religious content of national ideals, and perform many humanitarian services not supported by the state. At the end of the twentieth century, scholars can now look back and recognize the failure of mainline Protestants to maintain cultural prominence. Yet, at
the time the strength of Protestant efforts—from Prohibition to character education in public schools—as well as the possibility that those efforts might succeed, loomed much larger than their eventual decline. In fact, the resurgence of Protestant moralism combined with the mainline churches’ attempt to “modernize” Christianity to shape the two prominent conflicts of the 1920s, Allen’s “revolt of the highbrows” outside of the churches, and the fundamentalist-modernist controversy within the churches.11

Only by viewing “modern” Protestantism in this second sense—as a movement every bit as alien to cultural “modernism” as fundamentalism was—and by noting the lingering vitality and moral authority of the mainline churches can we begin to see the significance of the apparent anomalies in the career of J. Gresham Machen. Machen was indeed concerned about the dangers that “cultural modernism” posed to traditional faith. But he was even more worried about the “modernism” of American Protestantism and the cultural outlook upon which Protestant reconstructions of Christianity rested. For Machen, the moves by Protestants to “modernize” the faith—and not the efforts of “cultural modernists” to move beyond Christianity—comprised the greatest danger to Christianity. For by refashioning Christianity mainline Protestants hoped to maintain the churches’ role as cultural guardian. But in the process, Machen believed, they had confused influence with faithfulness. In fact, he held that theological integrity and cultural authority were inversely related: a theology eager for public influence invariably compromised the Christian faith, while a principled theology could at best benefit society indirectly.

Machen’s cultural concerns, thus, made him in the 1920s a reluctant ally of secular intellectuals but in the 1930s would cost him the support of fundamentalists. Like Machen, though for different reasons, cultural modernists also bristled under mainstream Protestantism’s moral code, rejected its cheery estimate of human nature and the universe, and opposed its bid to Christianize American society. The subtext of Machen’s theological critique of Protestant modernism—that the churches had no business meddling in society—was good news to secularists who thought that America’s Protestant ethos impeded intellectual and cultural life. Fundamentalists, in contrast, were virtually deaf to Machen’s ideas about the relationship between Christianity and culture. To most conservatives throughout the 1920s, Machen was a champion of orthodoxy who had reestablished the theological foundations for Christian civilization in America. By the 1930s, however, his understanding of the church’s limited role in public life began to alienate fundamentalists. When Machen’s efforts to reform the Pres-
byterian Church were finally thwarted and he withdrew in 1936 to form a new denomination, his new church attracted few fundamentalists. They stayed away at least in part because they, unlike Machen, shared with modernizing Protestants the belief that Christian values constituted the bedrock of American society.

An examination of Machen's life is imperative, then, not because he is representative of fundamentalism or because he exercised enormous influence. Rather, he merits attention because his criticism of mainstream Protestantism's lukewarm faith yields a fresh, and startling, perspective on the encounter between religious conservatism and modern culture. For Machen, although he was very conservative in religion, the threat of cultural modernism—pitting modern relevance against old-fashioned dogma, scientific verification against an implausible faith, and metaphysical skepticism against religious certainty—was not as great as the danger posed by Protestant hegemony in a free and diverse society. As great as the challenges of modern science and philosophy were, in the end they were not as profound as the peril of a religion that tailored its faith and practice to fit the prevailing temper of the age. It was no accident, then, that when Machen faulted Protestant churches for abandoning their proper tasks he used language that with surprising regularity echoed secular intellectuals.

In his only published autobiographical reflection Machen wrote that his life deserved attention only because, "not being remarkable," it revealed "in a concrete way the experience of a considerable body of men." He was wrong, for what makes Machen interesting and deserving of more careful study was his unconventional dedication to both an old Protestant orthodoxy and a new (even "modern") standard of religious pluralism. To understand how these apparently contradictory impulses could coexist in J. Gresham Machen enlightens cultural dimensions of the fundamentalist controversy in a new way and, more generally, redefines our knowledge of the relationships among religion, science, and modernism in the early twentieth century.12
CHAPTER ONE

Between Culture and Piety

The religion of the sensible American is, therefore, not one of creed or ceremony or emotion, not one primarily of the intellect, but a religion of faith and love and action—a confidence that the universe of matter and of spirit is reality, that its functions are in wise hands, . . . and that our part is to help our brother organisms to more abounding lives. David Starr Jordan (1908)

J. Gresham Machen grew up in an era when a career in the ministry no longer held the appeal or status that it had for previous generations. By the late nineteenth century many Americans who in earlier decades would have entered the ministry chose alternatives from a wide variety of professions. When the choice regarding the ministry was complicated by religious doubts, the decision making was often traumatic. For some, the encounter with Darwinism or biblical criticism made it intellectually impossible to pursue a career as a traditional minister. For others, ambivalence about an ecclesiastical career stemmed from an uncommon dread of the cultural restrictions placed upon the clergy. Especially for undergraduates at America’s new universities, who relished intellectual freedom and who believed that an academic career represented a calling as high and serious as the ministry, serving the church might seem tantamount to giving up the life of the mind as well as the refinements and amusements of genteel culture.1

An article in World’s Work published in 1904 gives some perspective on the depreciating fortunes of a clerical vocation. Entitled “The Decline of the Ministry,” it showed that many church and college leaders were worried about the obstacles facing prospective ministers and doc-
umented an "unprecedented reluctance" to choose the ministry as a profession. The author found that fewer undergraduates were preparing to be clerics, that those undertaking such preparation tended to be poor students, and that the number of seminarians with degrees from Eastern colleges was declining. Varied explanations for these developments included the comparative poverty of ministers, the falling status of clergy, the rise of opportunities to accomplish social good outside the church, and the narrowness of denominational creeds. One student voiced the problem that worried many of Machen's generation. "If a thing is right it's right, and that's all there is to it, but if I'm a minister, I can't do a great many things the church people will do, just because I am a minister." He concluded that he was willing to do his best, but he would not be "labeled and tagged and put off from the rest of the world."2

Such opinions were very much a part of J. Gresham Machen's early life. Indeed, his emergence in the 1920s as the country's foremost conservative New Testament scholar and academic spokesman for the fundamentalist movement could not have been predicted by the religious and vocational doubts he experienced as a young man. Not until 1913, at the age of 32 and after lengthy turmoil, did he decide to seek ordination. The steps leading up to that decision go a long way toward understanding the contours of his career as a scholar and ecclesiastical reformer. They also provide an unusually sharp instance of the intellectual tensions within Victorian Protestantism and the effort by some believers to find ways to reconcile the competing claims of religion and the intellectual life encouraged by America's new universities.

In 1920 H. L. Mencken, though often regarded as a debunker of Southern life, paused to celebrate the South as a once-civilized land "with men of delicate fancy, urbane instinct and aristocratic manner—in brief, superior men." Even after Southern Agrarians had revealed to him less appealing aspects of Southern culture, Mencken still cited the civilization of "Virginia gentlemen" among his reasons for residing in Baltimore. Although he now distinguished between the "Classical Age" of the South and the industrialized New South, Mencken always idealized the good manners and aristocratic air of Southern culture.3

The home into which John Gresham Machen was born on July 28, 1881, embodied the gentility that charmed Mencken. The second of three sons, Machen came from a prominent and affluent family of ancient English stock whose sympathies and outlook were distinctively Southern. Machen's father, Arthur Webster Machen (1827–1915), was the son of Lewis Machen, a Principle Clerk in the U.S. Senate's Sec-
retary’s office, and Caroline Webster, a native of New Hampshire. Arthur grew up on the family’s farm in Fairfax County, Virginia, attended Columbian College (later George Washington University), and then studied law at Harvard. He settled in Baltimore in 1853 and established a legal practice that eventually placed him in the top rank of Maryland’s lawyers. During Arthur’s fifty-three-year career, only two Maryland lawyers argued more cases before the Baltimore bar than his total of 204.4

Arthur Machen’s tastes and interests, rooted in the classical tradition of the Old South, were decisive in defining his sons’ interests. He read the works of Horace, Thucydides, and Caesar with pleasure and found personal inspiration in the Septuagint version of the Old Testament and in the Greek New Testament. Classical training provided attorneys with rhetorical skills and gave them legal and political guidance from the examples of Greek and Roman republics. It also nourished the hallmark of the legal mind, precise and logically consistent reasoning—a trait on which Arthur’s sons would later rely whether opposing Prohibition in Maryland politics or theological liberalism in the Presbyterian Church. Arthur put this training to use by writing essays and book reviews on legal topics. Moreover, he was a bibliophile whose library contained a wide array of books, including fifteenth-century editions of classical authors.5

The senior Machen’s interests demonstrate the division between serious and amusing literature typical of Southern professional men before the era of specialized education. On the lighter side, Arthur Machen read French and English authors. He dabbled in writing, publishing several detective stories and short novels, some of them prize winners, in order to put himself through law school. His fiction was penned under a pseudonym, however, in order to avoid any suspicion of being a litterateur and so hindering his legal career. When 80 years old, he taught himself Italian “for the fun of it,” as his son wrote. Arthur showed a well-informed interest in biblical criticism, following his son Gresham’s academic interests and demonstrating a knowledge of German scholarship that impressed the younger Machen. It was no exaggeration when the Baltimore Sun eulogized the older Machen’s “wider claim to ordinary human interest and sympathy than his professional achievements.” The newspaper also praised “his intense and critical literary taste and the broad culture by which he strengthened and rounded his professional studies.” He was one of the last representatives of a profession “which was once the center of literary arts and graces.”6

Machen’s mother, Mary Gresham (1849–1931), also known as Min-
nie, grew up in Macon, Georgia, the daughter of John Jones Gresham (1818–91), a prominent public and commercial figure in that Southern town and Machen’s namesake. Although Machen would inherit money from his father, who profited from land sold in the nation’s capital, much of his wealth came from his maternal grandfather who, in addition to practicing law and serving as mayor of Macon, owned a cotton mill and directed two railroads. Mary Gresham Machen was educated in her home town at Wesleyan College and numbered among her college friends Gertrude Lanier, the sister of Sidney Lanier, and also Mary Day, the woman who would become Lanier’s wife. Minnie met her husband during a visit to an aunt, Mrs. Edgeworth Bird, a prominent member of Baltimore’s Southern gentry. After their marriage in 1873, the Machens settled a few blocks from Mary Gresham’s aunt in the Mount Vernon neighborhood, an area that was home to many affluent Baltimore families.7

Like her husband, Mary Gresham Machen was well read, but her tastes and routine were more typically Victorian. She displayed a marked interest in literature and read widely in French and English fiction and prose. Her greatest love was Victorian poetry, and she wrote The Bible in Browning, published in 1903, a work that defended the poet’s faith and indexed his use of biblical allusions and King James English. The Presbyterian faith that she nurtured in her sons was not, however, the sentimental variety commonly associated with Victorian Protestantism. For religious instruction Minnie relied upon older forms of Protestant piety—the Bible, the Westminster Catechism, and Pilgrim’s Progress—which acquainted her boys more with the intellectual content than with the emotional and moral demands of Christianity. She even required her sons to memorize the catechism and all the Kings of Israel. In addition to her literary interests and domestic duties, she regularly attended the theater and opera in Baltimore and entertained prominent guests at the Machen home, including Woodrow Wilson, Daniel Coit Gilman, president of Johns Hopkins University, and Francis L. Patton, president of Princeton University. Patton, who was also an ordained Presbyterian minister, was said to have welcomed his trips to the Machens’ home because he could enjoy some “spiritoous refreshment” without raising suspicions about his orthodoxy.8

Regular visits to relatives in Virginia and Georgia encouraged in Gresham (as he was called) a strong identification with the South. Until 1891, when Minnie Gresham Machen’s father died, each winter she took her sons to her Macon home for several weeks. During those holidays, while his mother continued his education, Gresham grew to ap-
preciate the charm of Southern gentility. He later recalled that his
grandfather’s home in Macon provided a glimpse of a “courtlier, richer
life, and a broader culture” than that dominating the “metallic” culture
of modern cities. Machen’s affection for the South also included sympa-
thy for that region’s political sensibilities. Not only did Machen be-
lieve that whites and blacks should not mix socially, but he also held
that the Civil War was primarily a struggle over states’ rights.

For all their rootage in the South, the Machen family had interests
elsewhere as well. Summer heat and humidity drove the elder Mach-
ens to vacation occasionally in New Hampshire’s White Mountains
(where Gresham developed an interest in mountain climbing), and to
rent a summer cottage each year in Seal Harbor, Maine. In his teens,
Machen also went to Dwight L. Moody’s summer camp in Northfield,
Massachusetts, and as an adult took advantage of New York City’s
charms as often as possible.9

The Machen household appears to have maintained an uneasy al-
liance between Victorianism and Southern classicism. That combina-
tion was not, however, the culture of the New South that Allen Tate
described as “a superficial Victorian veneer pasted over what was still
an eighteenth-century way of living.” Although Mrs. Machen incul-
cated Victorian norms of domesticity, spirituality, and restraint, and
while she nurtured an appreciation for refinement, the male culture of
the Virginia gentleman still survived in her home. The Machens’ sons,
Arthur, Jr., Gresham, and Thomas, grew up resisting the stuffy man-
ners and dress expected of them when in the company of women. They
reveled in the pranks and male camaraderie of college fraternities while
avidly following the athletic exploits of the teams from Johns Hopkins
as well as the Baltimore Orioles, then a minor-league team. Sometimes
their behavior bordered on crudeness, but it was typical of a patrician
outlook that both cultivated good manners and promoted manifestly
virile forms of behavior. This perspective informed Machen’s advice to
his younger brother, Tom, regarding a fraternity brawl, that “rough-
housing is one of those inherent rights—regardless of group—residing
in anyone who has succeeded in bucking into the second stage of his
education.” During his graduate education Machen especially enjoyed
club life. As a member of Princeton’s Benham Club, where diners were
prohibited from talking about religion or women, Machen gained a
reputation as one of the greatest “stunters” (relating a humorous tale
in an exaggerated and boisterous manner). While a student in Ger-
many, he was also an active member of the Burschenschaft Germania
which, according to his estimate, required six hours of activity each
day. Members, as he explained to his brother, ate large quantities of
food, drank beer, played tennis, fenced, and, when women were present, danced.\textsuperscript{10}

The Machen boys’ literary tastes mirrored their father’s, encompassing both serious study (classics, history, and political philosophy) and reading for pleasure (poetry, romance, and detective stories). While he enjoyed poetry, Gresham thought that it lacked the seriousness of other kinds of writing. The publication of \textit{The Bible in Browning} caught him with little knowledge of the poet and forced him to cram some Browning into Sunday reading in order to sound informed when commenting on his mother’s work. Overall, the Machen household managed to avoid the extremes of Victorian sentimentality and genteel formality thanks largely to the father’s classicist roots. Their home embodied what Mencken called the Southern gentleman’s “art of living,” which went “beyond and above the state of a mere infliction” and became “an exhilarating experience.”\textsuperscript{11}

The tensions between classicism and Victorianism, however, were not so easily resolved in the university world that Machen entered as a young man. Gresham’s primary and secondary education had reinforced his interests in the classics. His parents supervised his early schooling before enrolling him at age 11 in Marston’s University School for Boys, a private high school in Baltimore. Machen’s instruction in Greek and Latin there stood him in good stead for the classical curriculum he chose at Johns Hopkins University, one of Baltimore’s prize institutions, only a few blocks from the family home. Machen’s undergraduate course in Latin and Greek was not modeled strictly on the ideal of mental discipline, as had been the case at antebellum colleges. Johns Hopkins, although a path-breaking institution in graduate education and advanced research, still offered a three-year undergraduate course in the classics, a program crowned by the presence of the renowned classicist and Southern gentleman, Basil L. Gildersleeve (1831–1923). During the university’s infancy, President Daniel Coit Gilman had recruited Gildersleeve from the University of Virginia, put him in an empty lecture room, and told him to “radiate,” something that, by most students’ accounts, he did. To Machen, Gildersleeve’s rapid-fire classical allusions and his knowledge of world literature were as captivating as his precision in philology was exacting. In Gildersleeve’s Greek seminar, the translation and interpretation of original texts formed the basis of instruction. Meanwhile, the scientific methods of the German \textit{seminarium} put a premium on specificity and prohibited ambiguity, thereby reinforcing in Machen attention to careful argumentation.\textsuperscript{12}

Gildersleeve’s teaching furthered the distinction between light-
hearted literature and the study of ancient languages, or, in the professor’s terms, between aesthetics and grammar. Indeed, the philologist represented a tradition within American learning which promoted philological investigation as the surest means to a correct understanding of ancient texts, an approach that comported well with the university’s scientific atmosphere. While Machen was an undergraduate, philology also governed Hopkins’s instruction in English literature where courses in Anglo-Saxon and Middle English were prerequisite to advanced courses. Nevertheless, Gildersleeve, who in 1853 received a Ph.D. from Göttingen, thought the focus of German philology on translation, rather than interpretation, had created an “unbecoming controversy” between poets and philologists. So while encouraging specialization, he also defended the traditional undergraduate arts curriculum for its mental discipline and historical perspective, hoping to reconcile philology and aesthetic appreciation. Gildersleeve believed that the love of art required intensive study of grammar. Machen’s later concern for precise doctrinal expression and fidelity to the original meaning of scripture during the religious controversies of the 1920s can be traced in part to his studies with Gildersleeve. Meanwhile, his defense of the intellectual aspects of faith also paralleled Gildersleeve’s rationale for grammar. In fact, several classicists would later make criticisms of liberal Protestantism similar to Machen’s.13

As much as Gildersleeve tried to reconcile the scientific and aesthetic aspects of the study of language, the classicist orientation that Machen learned at Hopkins ran counter to the approach that dominated the study of literature in some universities and in polite society. “New Humanists,” such as Paul Elmer More of Princeton University and Irving Babbitt of Harvard University, were critical of the university’s stress upon science but their moral didacticism set them apart from “custodians of culture” commonly associated with the Genteel Tradition. Individuals such as Harvard’s Barrett Wendell and Princeton’s Henry Van Dyke deplored the specialization of modern learning, dispensed with pedagogical theory, and maintained that literature’s spiritual essence would teach itself. For them, literature should be beautiful and uplifting, “presenting life in its broad human interest” and revealing the ethical, the spiritual, and the immortal as the “chief factors in the divine drama of man.” Their eclectic methods relied on intuition and lacked the systematic analysis that Gildersleeve advocated. According to one of Wendell’s students, after reading a poem in class the Harvard professor would meditate for a moment and then exclaim, “Isn’t it beautiful?” The student explained that Wendell never “dissected a
piece of literature” because he knew that “to dissect [was] too often to kill.”

In many respects Machen’s ambivalence about entering the ministry was rooted in the classicist perspective (both old and new) that he had learned at home and at university. The sentimentality and didacticism of Victorian culture also permeated mainstream Protestantism. In the late nineteenth century many well-educated Americans had come to believe that religious experience was intimately tied to poetic expression. Thus, the sharp distinctions that Victorian culture made between the intellect and the emotions, materialism and idealism, and science and faith prompted Protestants to defend Christianity on idealist grounds. Romantic and evangelical influences furthered the affinity between Protestantism and aesthetic feeling by placing a premium on experience and heartfelt religion. Although they valued rationality and order in the workplace, Victorians loved preachers who could move their souls. Henry Ward Beecher and Phillips Brooks, two of the most popular preachers of the era, clothed religious truth in the “language of a poem.” At the same time, the revivalist Dwight L. Moody, whose sermons rarely relied on poetic images, used sentimental stories to win souls and further his crusade against vice in urban centers. The message contained in such preaching was a highly optimistic one that assured the middle class that changes and uncertainty in the spheres of science, politics, and business would be ultimately resolved through faith in a benevolent God and adherence to a strict moral code.

The same emotional appeals of Victorian preaching surprisingly made their way into Franklin Street Presbyterian Church, where the Machens were members. This church had been one of the most influential congregations within the Old School Presbyterian denomination, a wing of American Presbyterianism known primarily for its dogged allegiance to Calvinism in theology and its insistence upon uniformity in administrative matters. Harris E. Kirk, who came to the church in 1891, seemed at times to embody the Old School spirit. He prided himself on appealing to “men’s intelligence” and refusing to preach “the pretty, polite, rosewater sermon delivered with kid gloves on.” Yet sentimentality permeated Kirk’s conception of Christianity and crept into his sermons. He thought Christianity a religion of “invitations,” “inclusions,” and “affirmations” that penetrated civilization with the ideal of “the Divine kingdom.” For Kirk, religion was primarily concerned with the “unseen world” and required “periods of quiet, and private spiritual cultivation.” By mystical, spiritual communion with God individuals could “command . . . the highways of the soul.”
Henry Van Dyke, pastor at New York’s Old Brick Church prior to taking up the teaching of literature at Princeton, showed Machen another side of sentimental idealism in the pulpit. A distant relative of the Machens whom the sons called “Uncle Henry,” and host to Machen at Princeton on many social occasions, Van Dyke fused Victorian aesthetics and Christian spirituality even more intentionally than Kirk. In a sermon on the Bible’s truthfulness, for example, he asserted that the best way to verify scripture was through “spiritual life,” not the detailed scholarship that professors at Princeton Seminary were still recommending. This religious spirit alone brought “strength and beauty and fragrance as of the springtide into the soul,” so that despite the cares and burdens of life in this world, the inward man could be “renewed day by day.” Van Dyke also spoke in idealistic terms when preaching on the role that religion should play in the “purifying, preserving, and sweetening of society.” The true test of faith lay “in its power to cleanse life and make it worth living” and “to save the things that are most precious in our existence from corruption and decay.” Faith lent “a new luster to our ideals” and fed human aspirations “with inextinguishable light.”

The cultural and intellectual instincts of J. Gresham Machen did not rest easily with the moralism and sentimentality of Victorian Protestantism. His reaction to such piety was probably similar to his older brother’s assessment of Van Dyke’s literary criticism. After listening to the professor’s lectures on poetry at Johns Hopkins, Arthur Jr. wrote to his brother in 1906 that the addresses were “commonplace to a degree . . . wholly unworthy of delivery in a university,” and suitable only “for the entertainment of a crowd of women at an afternoon tea.” Church leaders in the early decades of the twentieth century also sensed the inadequacy of a faith that seemed to be limited to the world of ideals and the human spirit, wholly removed from everyday concerns of business, politics, and academics. In turn, they tried through a variety of programs to bring men back to the churches by recognizing the religious significance of work, sports, and practical affairs. No doubt Machen’s prolonged and at times meandering search for a career after his undergraduate education reflected the problems that Protestants were trying to correct. But his difficulties went beyond the seeming irrelevance of Christianity to a deep ambivalence about the intellectual shallowness of the churches. His distaste for Victorian spirituality and accompanying reluctance to become a clergyman would be overcome only when he found a way to use in the church the critical thinking he learned in the university.
After a distinguished undergraduate career at Johns Hopkins, from which he was graduated in 1901 with the highest honors and elected to Phi Beta Kappa, Machen searched for a professional niche. As a reward for his achievements, his parents sent him for a summer in Europe with his older brother and cousin. After returning to Baltimore, he enrolled in Basil L. Gildersleeve's graduate seminar in the classics. Despite his success under Gildersleeve, an academic career in classics held no immediate appeal. He then spent the summer of 1902 at the University of Chicago taking courses in banking and international law. A letter to his father, who was long on patience, encouragement, and financial resources, reveals that Machen actually considered studying economics at Columbia the following school year. "The ministry," he wrote, "I am afraid I can't think of."19

Throughout these years of indecision Machen exhibited an inability to accept a routine existence. The success of his father and older brother haunted his thoughts about a career. He would later confess that his own talents seemed "utterly puny" next to the broad cultural and professional attainments of his family. As a result, fear of failure compounded religious anxiety. Even if Machen had pursued a career in law or banking he would have wanted the assurance that his work was of vital and lasting importance. Although his parents were always supportive, Machen's hesitancy about a religious vocation stemmed from a deep urge to show a family quite successful in the legal world that his own work was not, at best, commonplace, or, at worst, a failure. Nevertheless, no matter how indecisive Gresham might be about a career, he usually managed to have a good time. While studying at the University of Chicago with its theaters, bookstores, and its flat terrain for bike rides, he remarked that he had found "the best summer resort."20

A stop in Baltimore before the fall semester of 1902 provided the maturing student with some advice from the family's minister, Harris E. Kirk. Kirk counseled Machen to attend Princeton Seminary for one year. Machen reluctantly heeded his minister, with the understanding that such a move would not commit him to the ministry. "With many serious misgivings," he wrote his mother, "I have decided to go to Princeton for the year's work and I only wish I could go into it with more faith and more assurance that it is the right thing." At Princeton, Machen showed little interest in the course of instruction. Fresh from the independence of Gildersleeve's seminar, he complained at once of being required to attend all classes. Princeton Seminary, he wrote, "is run like a boarding school." He abhorred afternoon classes, "that evil
invention,” because they impeded fun and relaxation. The surface of the seminary’s tennis courts was so uneven that he compared it to the Swiss Alps. (Years later as a faculty member, Machen eventually financed and supervised the construction of new tennis courts, complete with an irrigation system, but was less successful in convincing the seminary’s groundskeeper to maintain them.)

Since the seminary’s basic courses in homiletics and Old Testament could hardly compare with the riches of Princeton University—Woodrow Wilson’s lectures on American constitutional history, Henry Van Dyke’s class in English poetry, Alexander T. Ormund’s seminar in German philosophy, and Francis L. Patton’s instruction in British ethics—Machen took advantage of the seminary’s proximity to the university and enrolled as an M.A. candidate in philosophy. Yet he did not let formal instruction interfere with an insatiable desire for amusement. Trips to New York for its plays and bookstores, bike rides to Swarthmore to watch Johns Hopkins’s lacrosse and football teams, and ice skating on the Delaware Canal were constant distractions. On one occasion, when confronted with a choice between a Princeton football game and a late afternoon Hebrew class, the decision was an easy one. Football, his “chief pleasure,” won easily.

During his first year at Princeton, Machen showed no inclination toward the ministry. In one letter to his mother he reported, as if boasting, that he had flunked an Old Testament test, even though he eventually learned he had passed. He protested of being “chiefly afflicted by the boredom of the thing” and looked forward to the “happy day when the last of the nauseating series has been left behind forever.” Even intensive work in New Testament exegesis, for which he won a $100 fellowship, was to Machen no more than “a trifling matter.” When he discovered that only two students had entered the contest, he considered refusing the prize. Of a homiletics exam Machen wrote that he hoped he had “hot-aired as much as the subject required.” The only subject that interested him was the university’s seminar in philosophy and he was comforted by the professor’s reputation for never having failed anyone.

Despite Machen’s pose of lassitude, both William Park Armstrong, professor of New Testament, and Francis L. Patton, president of the seminary, were impressed by his abilities. At the end of his second year Patton recommended that Machen remain at the seminary after finishing his degree to teach New Testament Greek and related topics. During Machen’s senior year, he began what would become a book-length study of the birth narratives in the New Testament. The first fruits of this work were good enough to merit the seminary’s New
Testament fellowship, the Maitland Prize, and to be published in the 
Princeton Theological Review. Despite such encouragement, Machen still 
remained unclear about his future. He eventually decided to pursue 
进一步研究 in Germany, but with no clear end in view. Although he 
could have used his fellowship from Princeton to finance part of this 
trip, he refused, fearing that acceptance would obligate him to return 
to teach at the seminary.24

At Marburg, where Machen studied first in the fall of 1905, the main 
attraction was Adolf Jülicher, well known for his Introduction to the New 
Testament and The Parables of Jesus. But the teacher who most captivated 
Machen was Wilhelm Herrmann, professor of theology and a disciple 
of Albrecht Ritschl, the magisterial ethicist whose chief accomplish-
ment was to redefine Christian faith as a moral, not dogmatic, system. 
It was Herrmann who forced the young American to reexamine his 
understanding of piety, a process that in the end made it possible for 
Machen to enter the ministry.

Like Protestant preachers in America who viewed Christianity in 
idealistic terms, Herrmann made a sharp distinction between the com-
peting methods of science and theology. He relied upon Ritschl’s dis-
dain for Hegelian metaphysics to break all ties between religion and 
philosophy, maintaining that correct metaphysics had nothing to do 
with moral behavior. Indeed, for Herrmann, Christianity was primarily 
moral and active. In contrast to philosophy’s stress upon the world of 
science, religion concerned the highest good and how it might be 
achieved. Hermann premised his theology upon the recognition that 
liberal Protestant efforts to ground Christian faith on the historical Je-
sus would always be subject to the shifting sands of biblical scholar-
ship. Consequently, Herrmann argued that the significance of Jesus 
did not rest upon the accuracy of historical inquiry and he stressed the 
ethical demands of the gospel, conceiving of Christian life as one of 
service. He still insisted upon the importance of Christianity’s histori-
cal origins to theology and tried to avoid reducing theology to ethics. 
But Herrmann’s effort to liberate theology from historical investiga-
tion, no doubt, explains the profound impact he had upon Machen and 
Karl Barth, both of whom would sharply criticize liberal Protestantism 
for making Christianity independent of biblical history.25

The spirituality of which Herrmann wrote, however, provided an 
immediate benefit to the struggling Machen. As a student of Ritschl, 
Herrmann stressed the active life demanded by Christian faith and 
thus broke significantly with the tradition of Protestant liberalism in-
augurated by Friedrich Schleiermacher who early in the nineteenth 
century had made a feeling of dependence the essence of religious ex-
perience. More important for Machen than the apparent strenuousness of Herrmann’s piety was his status as a university professor. Unlike America, where preachers and academics seemed to be drifting apart, the German university continued to recognize theology as an important discipline. For Machen, Herrmann represented a model for reconciling the seemingly divergent worlds of religion and academic rigor.26

Machen described his first encounter with Herrmann as “an epoch” in his life. “Such an overpowering personality I think I almost never before encountered”—overpowering, he explained, in the sincerity of his religious devotion. Not only did Machen find Herrmann’s theology alive, in comparison to New England’s “corpse cold liberalism,” but the theologian’s Christocentric teaching aided Machen’s own faith. “He is a Christian not because he follows Christ as a moral teacher; but because his trust in Christ is unbounded.” Machen confessed that Herrmann’s “revolutionary” views had confused him. Still, he rated the theologian’s The Communion of the Christian with God as “one of the greatest religious books” he had read.27

Some have interpreted the religious doubts that appeared in Machen’s letters from Germany as a sign that the acids of higher criticism had begun to eat away at his inherited faith in a historically reliable Bible. Yet Machen’s worries clearly preceded his study in Europe. As he later wrote about this period, “It was not Germany . . . that first brought doubts into my soul.” Years before his German student days, he admitted, he had been forced to face the problem of “hold[ing] on with the heart to something that one has rejected with the head.” Machen’s training at Johns Hopkins, a university that had no faculty of theology or ecclesiastical ties, was probably more overtly secular than what he encountered in Germany. Moreover, his flippant behavior while attending Princeton Seminary, a citadel of Protestant orthodoxy, confirms that he was by no means a model of conservative convictions before studying in Germany.28

Herrmann’s vigorous presentation of Christian ethics had actually heightened the sense of religious inadequacy that Machen had begun to experience at Princeton. By the time he moved from Marburg to Göttingen during the winter of 1906 he began to reassess his faith. In February he admitted to his father that the religious atmosphere at Princeton had seemed insincere. “I had so long kept up the form of piety, and even engaged in active church work;” he wrote, “when the whole thing was hypocrisy.” What he needed was to start out fresh, as he had done in Germany, to break all connections with a “false life.” To choose the ministry now, he thought, “would be simply to fall back
into the old rut." He planned to finish the year and then go directly into "some line of work where I at least know that I am doing no harm." Without a sense of moral worth Machen thought he was unfit for the ministry. As he prepared for his studies in Göttingen in the spring of 1906, Machen wrote to his brother that he had little enthusiasm for what awaited him. "I am too much troubled with problems of various kinds—there is not a solid enough bottom under my whole course of life." Because of the expectations he and his family placed upon the ministry, Machen felt that moral as well as intellectual certitude was required before making such a decision. "I wish I could live over the last five years of my life," he lamented to his brother, "so that I could get into something where every stroke of work surely tells." 29

At Göttingen, as Machen immersed himself in New Testament studies, his apprehensions shifted more narrowly to intellectual grounds. These doubts concerned the truthfulness of Christianity. Still, he rarely discussed these matters in letters to his family. And despite his earlier enthusiasm for Herrmann’s teaching, he did not think that liberal Protestant efforts to make Christ’s teachings independent of the supernatural were convincing. Throughout his stay in Germany, in fact, Machen demonstrated a firm grasp of the distinctions between liberal and traditional Protestantism, always siding with the latter. In one letter to his brother he expressed surprise that Herrmann had been so appealing. In another he informed his mother that he would be sorry if German liberalism were true. Machen was even prepared to give up his highly esteemed membership in Burschenschaft Germania if it meant that he could not wear the society’s uniform into the conservative Baptist congregation where he often worshiped. Only after a chat with Prof. Wilhelm Heitmueller of Göttingen about the religious views of the Germania, which blossomed into a debate over liberal theology, did Machen decide that he could stay in the society in good conscience. He thought that liberals in Germany, though suspect on doctrinal grounds, were properly concerned about Christian morality and reforming society. Moreover, the earnestness of liberal Protestants and their desire not to divide the church were "grounds for the utmost caution in our manner of opposing them." 30

During his stay at Göttingen Machen began to be troubled by the absence of conservative scholarship that could match the impressive attainments of German liberals. From Marburg he had complained that insufficient knowledge of New Testament criticism left him unable to rebut the views of his professors. As he studied the religionsgeschichtlich method of biblical criticism with Wilhelm Bousset, Wilhelm Schuerer, and Wilhelm Heitmueller, feelings of inadequacy grew. This school of
study strove to understand the New Testament in relation to its surrounding cultures. Unlike American theological liberalism, which Machen believed was cut off from the university, here was impressive scholarship that rooted liberal religion in demanding academic training. "In the field of N. T. there is no place for the weakling," he wrote. "Decisiveness, moral and intellectual, is absolutely required."\(^{31}\)

The intellectual challenges of New Testament criticism gradually resolved Machen's doubts about both his faith and the choice of a career. The emphasis of Bousset's research on the historical origins of Christianity in particular offered Machen an outlet for both his religious and academic interests, and a way to reject what he believed was the sentimental anti-intellectualism of American Protestantism. It began to dawn on Machen that a career might be built by using his training in philology and the classics to ground orthodox belief in sound scholarship. Machen's sense of intellectual mission was manifest in his growing appreciation for Princeton Seminary, particularly New Testament scholar William Park Armstrong. As he listened to Bousset's lectures Machen was reminded of Armstrong's thorough lectures on the history of New Testament criticism. He wrote home that Princeton differed from other conservative institutions because it did not "hide from the real state of affairs in biblical study." It made an honest effort to understand "the ruling tendency." While still in Germany, Machen was offered a teaching job by the Winonia Bible School in New York. Machen's response indicated the problems he saw in the work promoted by such institutions. "That kind of semi-popular and devotional semi-scientific work is no doubt a good thing—but it is the last thing I could do." Besides, he explained, "a little learning is a dangerous thing." What was needed was "real university work." Now from Germany he could see that his own training at Johns Hopkins was modeled on the demanding regimen of German graduate study. That realization, in turn, prompted him to rethink his opinion of Princeton Seminary, which now he praised as "imbued with 'university' spirit in its best form."\(^{32}\)

Machen's new admiration for Princeton Seminary turned out to be well timed. Armstrong was eager to hire Machen as a junior colleague. On July 14, 1906, Armstrong wrote to Machen at Göttingen, offering him the position of instructor in New Testament. The older man was well aware of Machen's recent ambivalence about a career and so presented the offer without strings attached. Machen would not have to be licensed or ordained as a Presbyterian minister, or even take the preliminary steps toward ordination. His duties would include instruc-
tion in elementary Greek, a class in exegesis, and a survey course on the content of the New Testament. Machen felt that he could not put Armstrong off any longer and accepted the position, worrying that he would have to bluff his way on unfamiliar subjects but relieved that he would not have to be ordained.33

Machen's rising estimate of Princeton's intellectual respectability was accompanied by a growing identification with the institution's theological traditions. Founded in 1812 to combat skepticism and Deism, the seminary through its leading theologians, Archibald Alexander (1772–1851), Charles Hodge (1797–1878), Archibald Alexander Hodge (1823–1886), and Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (1851–1921), had become well known for its defense of the rational and objective nature of Christianity. These Presbyterian theologians made regular, if selective, use of the Scottish philosophy of Common Sense to frame their apologetics. This included the adoption of Francis Bacon's inductive method and the complementary belief in the basic reliability of ordinary human perception. That philosophy was rooted in the notion that ordinary people, not just philosophers, could truly understand the physical universe and human experience through careful observation. The apparent contradiction between Princeton's trust in Common Sense and its adherence to the doctrine of universal human sinfulness had little effect on these professors' assertions about the scientific character of theology. In his introduction to Systematic Theology (1872), Charles Hodge had argued that the theologian should strive to be just as scientific as the chemist or astronomer. "The Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science," he wrote. "It is his store-house of facts." In similar terms, Warfield, who like Hodge before him was the chief name at Princeton, claimed that the theologian needed to think through and organize Christian teaching not merely in order to defend it but to attack opposing views. Christianity, he argued, "has been placed in the world to reason its way to the dominion of the world."34

The Princeton theological tradition that others at the time and since have criticized for overintellectualizing Christianity became even more attractive to Machen. Francis Patton's teaching about the objective, factual truthfulness of Christianity proved especially influential in helping the junior scholar resolve his religious doubts. Why Machen failed to appreciate the seminary's instruction while a student remains a mystery. To be sure, Machen's frivolous attitude and lackadaisical approach to the seminary curriculum contrasted with his earlier seriousness in Gildersleeve's seminars. Another distraction was his pref-
ference for his courses in the master’s program at Princeton University over those at the seminary. Whatever the reason, his time in Germany had given him the chance to see Princeton in a different light and to regard employment there as a way of pursuing first-rate scholarship while avoiding the sentimental hazards of an ecclesiastical career.35

To imply that the transition to Machen’s new perspective was smooth, however, would be misleading. Immediately upon return to Princeton he complained that his first faculty meeting was “long and stupid.” He found the students ill-prepared and threatened to flunk 75 percent of an early class on the Pauline epistles. The possibility of entering the ministry also seemed as remote as it had in Germany. Machen decided, consequently, to teach for only one year at Princeton, out of respect for Armstrong, and then return to Germany to pursue a Ph.D. in classics. He wrote to his mother that if his sole hopes for a career were confined to the ministry he would be in despair. Still, he believed that his studies in classics would contribute “something to our knowledge of the New Testament.” This secondary purpose, he confessed, was his “secret reliance” because it gave him “something to fall back on” should he not be able to resolve his religious and professional doubts.36

Rather than bringing relief to his family for at least making up his mind, Machen’s decision alarmed his mother. She interpreted his talk of hypocrisy and plans to study in Germany as a sign of rejecting Christianity. As an antidote to what she perceived as spiritual decline, Mrs. Machen appealed to the faith of Gresham’s youth, one which “though not contrary to reason, does transcend reason.” She admitted that this was strictly an emotional appeal, “a clinging to that faith for myself and for you.” But she had misjudged not only her son’s intention but also his predilections. Machen’s sharp rebuke reassessed his discomfort with the Victorian habit of overcoming intellectual doubts by appealing to experience. He conceded to his mother that “your own religious experience” and “the clear way in which you see [its] many grounds . . . are legitimate arguments.” But he objected to their being used to stifle other kinds of arguments and to restrict his own intellectual development. Then he asked her, “Don’t you see, that however right your action is from your point of view—however loyal and admirable even—if I should follow you I should be guilty of simple old-fashioned intellectual dishonesty?” This, he said, was “a sin greater than disbelief.”37

Machen never returned to Germany to pursue a Ph.D. Instead, a close friendship with Armstrong and the steadying advice of Patton
gradually won him over to the seminary. Doubts about abilities as a teacher and tortured thoughts about entering the ministry still riddled the letters he wrote during his first years as an instructor. But once Machen grew more comfortable with teaching he also began to discover a spirituality fitting his intellectual concerns. No dramatic breakthrough occurred, but a letter to his mother in the fall of 1908 was revealing. He complained that none of the students were enrolling in his elective courses (which were intended as rigorous encounters with modern scholarship) and few showed any real interest in New Testament Greek. These were signs, he wrote, of "the extremely low intellectual standard among the future ministers of the Presbyterian Church." For them, "true piety, high motives," but also "deep ignorance" were the rule. Despite his discouragement at the students' lack of intellectual convictions, he supposed he ought to reconcile himself to this state of affairs for the situation differed little from the early church. Still, he believed that there should be at least one place in the church for scholars who could address the problems of modern life and "make modern culture subservient to the gospel." This letter, which defends intellectual life as a religious calling, was the closest Machen came to a formal declaration for the ministry. But despite the absence of a well-defined turning point, this letter's line of reasoning became pivotal for his later opposition to liberal Protestantism. That opposition would grow, to be sure, from a concern for defending traditional theology, but its sting would come from an expectation that other Presbyterian clergy and educators would display the same intellectual honesty that he demanded from himself. 38

An incident in 1909 during his third year as an instructor demonstrated how rapidly Machen's resolve had solidified. In February of that year, first- and second-year students staged a pocket rebellion by complaining to the seminary's board of directors about the institution's curriculum and its teaching. Specifically, the students criticized the course of instruction for being too academic and far removed from the demands that clergy faced in the parish. They wanted more electives and more instruction in the English Bible rather than having to master Greek and Hebrew. Although this revolt was mild compared to the student riots occurring at other American colleges and universities in these years, the seminary's troubles did attract a good deal of coverage in the major newspapers of New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. The Baltimore News, for example, sided with the students and opined that the school needed a "modern and more scientific and practical course of instruction." Princeton Seminary's "sister Presbyterian in-
stitution," Union Seminary in New York, the paper added, was "among the foremost in all departments" and represented the "broader spirit of the Presbyterian Church." According to the News, the "old order" was gone and ministers needed instruction in practices that accorded with "the nature and the spirit and the laws of life," rather than a formal education that forced students into the tight categories of particular religious doctrines.  

Machen's first letter home about the incident confirmed the newspaper report. What the students wanted were more courses in English Bible and practical theology. Machen considered this compelling evidence of anti-intellectualism. The students "want to be pumped full of material which, without any real assimilation or any intellectual work of any kind, they can pump out again upon their unfortunate congregations." Machen believed that concessions to the students would extinguish whatever "spark of learning" still existed in the Presbyterian Church. He also believed the students' demands were completely out of step with the sort of academic standards he had come to appreciate at Johns Hopkins and in Germany. To him Princeton's curriculum, emphasizing systematic theology and the study of scripture in the original languages, perpetuated the precision and clarity he had learned to value while doing advanced studies in the classics and the New Testament. What especially angered him was that the students had singled out Armstrong, who lectured brilliantly but in a soft-spoken monotone voice on the history of biblical criticism, when they complained that some professors were oblivious to the practical considerations of future ministers. This criticism sprang, Machen said, from a "revolt against modern university methods rather than against theological conservatism." Professors at the university were wondering why "the only gleam of light in the general darkness of the seminary should have been one of those singled out for attack." In the end, the student uprising did not result in any significant curricular reforms but did reveal the seeds of dissatisfaction at Princeton Seminary that twenty years later would blossom into a major crisis in which Machen would be the key defender of conservative ways.

Machen's support for senior faculty suggests that he was forgetting his own seminary days. At that time he had complained about the poor quality of the lectures and the monotony of the curriculum. As a professor, Machen tried to enliven his classes with comic and at times eccentric behavior. His students, for instance, recalled his habit of reading the morning mail while catching their errors as they declined Greek nouns or parsed verbs. One student remembered an incident
when a particularly befuddled classmate could not readily explain a grammatical construction. Machen leaned over the student and gradually inserted his fist into his own mouth until the perplexed pupil gave the correct response. While lecturing, Machen would also sometimes bump his head gently against the wall, balance a book on his head, or write an entire conjugation backwards on the blackboard. Such unorthodox teaching techniques, however, were only matters of form. On issues of substance, Machen believed that revising the seminary's older curriculum would compromise the institution's theological and academic distinction.41

Further evidence of Machen's growing identification with Princeton's traditions came again in 1909 when the seminary's board of directors considered his own pastor, Harris E. Kirk, for the vacant chair of homiletics. As one of the Southern church's most popular preachers, Kirk spoke frequently at both Princeton University and the seminary and was a natural choice for the position. Yet Kirk refused the offer because he believed that the seminary was isolated from the university and because he felt he would be too aggressive for the seminary's good. Machen was relieved to hear of Kirk's decision, but not because he thought that Kirk would be too aggressive. Rather, from Machen's perspective, Kirk was too much beholden to the standard pieties of Victorian Protestantism and not aware of the issues that were dividing the American churches. Machen wrote to his mother and father, who were among the minister's biggest supporters at Franklin Street Church, that Kirk was scared off by the "biggest fight" facing Presbyterians in many years. Moreover, because the seminary affirmed two doctrines, "the incarnation and the necessity of a new birth," that were becoming increasingly suspect in fashionable circles, Machen believed it would always suffer from a "certain degree of isolation" from the university. He speculated that Kirk's refusal in fact stemmed from the seminary's isolation from the more popular and sentimental elements in the Presbyterian Church. The reason for this isolation was the seminary's belief that "scientific work is an absolute necessity for a religion that pretends to be based on facts." The seminary had to convince the church's evangelical wing that scholarship was just as important as evangelism. If Kirk was unaware that such battle lines were being drawn, Machen reasoned, then it was just as well that he turned Princeton down. This incident did not result in an open breach between the young man and his family's pastor. Kirk knew nothing of Machen's reaction and later agreed to preach at Machen's ordination as Presbyterian minister. But Machen's belief that Kirk was not suited
for Princeton Seminary underscored his hardening conviction that a
tradition that always yoked the intellectual and spiritual aspects of
Christianity was the only one he could embrace. After having reached
this conclusion, Machen found that his earlier reluctance to seek or-
dination disappeared.\textsuperscript{42}

Although he was not licensed until 1914, Machen showed no further
signs of spiritual or professional doubt. Beginning in 1911, he began
to preach more regularly in the seminary chapel and accepted invita-
tions to preach at nearby churches in New Jersey and Pennsylvania,
despite worries that his delivery was putting worshipers to sleep. In
1912 he also began to teach Sunday school courses for teenagers at First
Presbyterian Church, Princeton. About the same time he also agreed
to become Sunday school superintendent provided he would not have
to lead singing. Machen grew so comfortable in his position at the sem-
inary, in fact, that in letters to his family he mentioned only in passing
what earlier had loomed as a traumatic decision to seek ordination.\textsuperscript{43}

An address that the young professor delivered to the Philadelphia
Ministers' Association in the spring of 1912 revealed his maturing
thoughts on the ministry. The address was to be a defense of "scientific
theological study" that he repeated at the seminary's opening exer-
cises in the fall of that year. A forthright declaration of the aims of
theological education at Princeton, the lecture also contained Machen's
personal confession of faith. It was published a year later in the \textit{Prince-
ten Theological Review} under the title "Christianity and Culture."\textsuperscript{44}

As Machen saw it, the central problem facing the church was the
strain between knowledge and piety, between "culture and Christian-
ity." Within the church this tension was evident in the growing rift
between evangelists and theologians, between "practical" and "sci-
entific" tendencies. It was also apparent in the prevalent notion that
religion had to do only with the emotions and the will, while intellec-
tual life concerned knowledge and culture. At the seminary, however,
these airtight compartments were unacceptable. Princeton prided itself
in applying the same methods of study to religion "as were formerly
reserved for natural science and history." The Bible at the seminary,
moreover, was not studied for moral and spiritual improvement alone
but also for the sake of knowledge. Machen described the confronta-
tion between culture and piety not as a clash over the truth or falsity
of Christianity but rather as a divide between competing methods, the
"scientific spirit" \textit{versus} the "old spirit of simple faith." In short, theo-
logical study brought students and faculty "face to face" with the prob-
lem of the relationship between knowledge and piety.\textsuperscript{45}
Machen went on to say that to this conflict three solutions were possible. The first, and most popular in the modern university, was the subordination of the Christian message to science by eliminating the supernatural. Although Machen would later argue that Protestant liberals pursued this course, in 1912 he focused upon the prevailing idea of religion which identified belief with the emotions and the will. Such a conception subordinated Christianity to culture by driving a wedge between religion and science and left Christians to take their intellectual cues from the secular culture. The second solution, which prevailed in the young Bible institutes and would eventually spawn fundamentalism, went to the opposite extreme. In its effort to preserve the supernatural authority of the gospel, this approach destroyed culture or, at best, regarded it as a matter of indifference. Although Machen preferred the consistency of this solution to the first, he nonetheless argued that it was "illogical and unbiblical"—illogical because Christianity could not be separated from truths discovered by the intellect, and unbiblical because God had intended humans to exercise their powers of mind. The fully legitimate solution in Machen's view was the consecration of culture to religious endeavor. Instead of destroying or being indifferent to the arts and sciences, instead of "stifling the pleasures afforded by the acquisition of knowledge or by the appreciation of what is beautiful," he thought Christians should "cultivate them with all the enthusiasm of the veriest humanist" while at the same time consecrating them to the service of God. This solution resolved the clash of Christianity and culture by affirming them both. The other approaches, no matter how attractive, left the tension unresolved.46

Machen's proposal from 1912 may be seen as part of the widespread effort in the early twentieth century to overturn the dichotomies of fact and spirit that defined Victorian culture. George Santayana, the Harvard philosopher, summarized this endeavor in his essay "The Genteel Tradition and American Philosophy." Santayana blamed the idealism of the Genteel Tradition for the unusual doubleness of American culture. He thought that it separated unnaturally the higher things of the mind (religion, literature, and morals) from the practical concerns of the will (business, technology, and science). His criticisms challenged a host of younger intellectuals to restore unity to American life, usually by trying to make ideals conform to reality. In literature, Van Wyck Brooks expressed the belief that the only hope for modern writers lay in striking a balance between society's "transcendent theories" and its "catch-penny realities." In philosophy, pragmatists demanded that
ideas be rooted in everyday life and that philosophy appropriate the implications of Darwinian science. The same impulse affected history and politics. James Harvey Robinson's "New History" strove to incorporate socioeconomic factors into a discipline that hitherto had been dominated by political abstractions. At the same time, Walter Lippmann and Herbert Croly were rejecting the doctrines of individualism and laissez faire for a corporate liberalism that yoked the interests of both big business and labor to social reform.47

Because Machen defended traditional Protestantism his religious views have rarely been linked to critics of the Victorian order. Yet Machen shared much of the critics' vision. To be sure, his foundational concerns were explicitly religious while the younger intellectuals who broke with the Gentee1 Tradition were often antagonistic to or uninterested in religion. Yet the Calvinistic theology with which Machen had come to identify could also be a source for criticizing the sentimentality and moralism of Victorian culture.

Machen expressed discomfort with Victorian Protestantism in the sermon he preached at his ordination to the Presbyterian ministry on June 23, 1914. His text, "Rejoice with trembling" (Psalm 2:11), yielded a definition of Christian joy that broke with the optimism that then prevailed widely in American Protestantism. Machen conceded that most Christians were joyful, but contended that theirs was a joy stemming almost entirely from membership in the "happy, contented, respectable classes." This kind of joy was merely the happiness of "social adjustment" and material comfort. It was not, however, the joy of which the text spoke. The source of the problem, Machen believed, lay in the faulty idea of God as a gentle and loving father. To restore a proper sense of joy, Machen recommended the "horrors of the old theology." Men and women needed only to look at human suffering and natural catastrophes, along with a clearer-eyed view of biblical teaching, to see that the humane God of modern Christianity was "onesided" and not a "real God." Only the God of traditional theology, Machen insisted, could restore the mystery and the sense of guilt that modern preaching lacked, and thus proclaim the forgiveness and mercy that enabled Christians to rejoice with trembling.48

It made perfect sense, then, that Machen, who articulated this sterner theology after coming through years of doubt and distress, would find at Princeton Seminary a welcome environment in which to work and live. Even at this early stage in his career Machen sensed that Princeton provided a sobering theology and an academic rigor that made it possible for him to yoke his religious sensibilities and his schol-
arily interests. This union of piety and culture was the essential argu-
ment of his essay "Christianity and Culture" and, in fact, echoed a
point that the seminary's leading theologian, Benjamin Breckinridge
Warfield, had made at the opening of the 1903 seminary year. Had
Machen not been so distracted then by uncertainty over his career he
might have heard Warfield also affirm the necessity for ministers to
receive both "intellectual training" and "spiritual culture." On that oc-
casion Warfield even equated intellectual attainment with piety by de-
scribing systematic theology as a means of grace and recommending
Protestant orthodoxy as a guide to practical religion. For Warfield, as
for Princeton theologians before him, the connection between the head
and the heart was intimate. If forced to choose between intellect and
piety, Warfield replied, "Why of course give us life!" But the alternative
did not have to be so sharp. Rather than choosing one or the other,
Warfield held that the proper Christian response was to affirm both
intellectual cultivation and practical devotion. In his eyes the daily
routine of seminary study should be both highly cerebral and deeply
spiritual.49

But there was a difference between Machen's and Warfield's ad-
dresses that reflected the dissimilar trajectories of their careers. War-
field, also a product of the Southern Presbyterian Church and at first
a professor of New Testament before coming in 1887 to Princeton as
professor of theology, devoted most of his energies to scholarship,
teaching, and nursing an invalid wife. He had little time for church
councils. Perhaps owing to these circumstances, his address stressed
the cloistered life of seminary life. Machen may have missed the sub-
stance of Warfield's address because the professor's message seemed
to reinforce the student's impression that religion was an musty affair,
cut off from the strenuous life of the scholar. Had Machen listened
carefully, however, he would have heard what was to become the
theme of his own later address and the theme that defined his career.
As Warfield saw it, the task of the minister demanded more, not less,
intellectual rigor. Because Christianity depended upon public procla-
ation, ministers needed intellectual training of the first order.50

For Machen, the growing rift between church and academy made
Warfield's conception of the ministry all the more urgent. The minister,
according to Machen, must transform "the unwieldy, resisting mass of
human thought until it becomes subservient to the gospel." Certainly,
this task would require the service of Christian scholars. But ministers
were not exempted. "What we need first of all," he said, especially in
our intellectually flaccid age "is a more general interest in the problems
of theological science." This intellectual reengagement was the only way to stem "the tremendous defection from the Christian Church." Instead of reducing seminaries to centers of religious sentiment and professional training, Machen wanted them to become "battlegrounds of the faith." There, with the help of Christian teachers, prospective ministers would be "taught to fight their own battle," to appreciate "the real strength of the adversary," and to substitute for the unthinking piety of childhood "the profound convictions of full-grown men." This was Machen's call to the ministry, the vision that he hoped to instill in students at Princeton, and the message he would eventually take before the councils of the Presbyterian Church.⁵¹