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10/2/97 Mohler analyzes E.Y. Mullins in Baptist classics series

Posted on Oct 2, 1997 | by James A. Smith Sr.

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--Reckoning him as "one of the towering figures of Southern Baptist history," R. Albert Mohler Jr. has compiled various writings of E.Y. Mullins under the title "The Axioms of Religion" in Broadman & Holman's "Library of Baptist Classics."

Mohler, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary's current president, analyzes the life and ministry of Mullins, the fourth president of Southern Baptists' oldest seminary, in a 32-page essay/introduction focusing on Mullins' biography, theology and leadership in the Southern Baptist Convention and wider Baptist and evangelical worlds. Broadman & Holman is the publishing arm of the SBC's Sunday School Board.

While celebrating the contributions of the denominational statesman, Mohler notes Mullins' theological legacy was his focus on individual experience as central to his theological method. This method, Mohler writes, has contributed to a present state of theological anemia among Southern Baptists.

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

"My purpose was to evaluate Mullins' thought and contribution with sympathy, but also with critical analysis," Mohler explained in an interview. "My concern was to compile a volume which would be genuinely helpful to Southern Baptists at the end of the 20th century, as well as providing an interesting view into Baptist life at the beginning of the century."

Mohler described Mullins as a "complex figure" who "left an incredible historical legacy" and who "represents one of those very high mountain peaks of influence and stature."

Edgar Young Mullins was the central figure of Southern Baptist life in the first half of the 20th century, Mohler writes in the introduction.

"Though he was assisted (and sometimes opposed) by other Baptist luminaries such as B.H. Carroll, Lee Scarborough and George W. Truett, Mullins was more influential than any other individual as Southern Baptists negotiated the turbulent early decades of the twentieth century," Mohler writes.

In addition to his noteworthy 28-year tenure as president of Southern Seminary, Mullins also served as president of the Southern Baptist Convention from 1921-24 and played a formative role in founding the Baptist World Alliance. Mullins also chaired the SBC committee which produced the denomination's first statement of faith in 1925, "The Baptist Faith and Message."

"Largely as a result of his efforts and leadership, Southern Baptists emerged in the twentieth century as a vital, growing and ambitious denomination," Mohler writes.

Although Mullins' greatness as a denominational leader is "secure," his theological legacy cannot be ignored, Mohler asserts.

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

"Once the autonomous individual is made the central authority in matters of theology -- a move made necessary by Mullins' emphasis on religious experience -- the authority of Scripture becomes secondary

at best, regardless of what may be claimed in honor of Scripture's preeminence," Mohler continues.

"Either personal experience will be submitted to revelation, or revelation will be submitted to personal experience. There is no escape from this theological dilemma, and every theologian must choose between these two methodological options."

Although Mohler is careful to note Mullins "was no liberal in terms of doctrine," the Baptist leader was "near the liberals in terms of method. The generations to follow would be tempted to make the shift in doctrine, as well as method."

Southern Seminary's newest church history professor agrees with Mohler's assessment of Mullins' impact on Southern Baptist life.

"Mullins brought Southern Seminary into the 20th century and molded its direction for the largest part of the century," Thomas J. Nettles, professor of historical theology, told Baptist Press. "The current president, God willing, will lead the seminary into the 21st century and could shape its influence for years to come. Mohler on Mullins is quite an appropriate project."

Among the writings compiled by Mohler in the 1997 B&H volume is "The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith." Published in 1908, Mohler notes while Mullins was best known in seminary classrooms for his textbook "Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression," the "Axioms" volume was and continues to be the book for which most Southern Baptists know Mullins.

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

Mohler also notes Mullins "was concerned that Baptists were known more for what they reject (ecclesiastical hierarchies, infant baptism, interdenominational union, etc.) than for what they affirm out of their deepest convictions.

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

"The emphasis on soul competency is, as Mullins must have both hoped and expected, the most enduring element of Mullins' legacy," Mohler continues. "The concept does underscore the necessity of personal religious experience -- including repentance and faith -- to the Christian life. But soul competency also serves as an acid dissolving religious authority, congregationalism, confessionalism and mutual theological accountability."

In the second half of the B&H volume, Mohler compiled 11 articles and/or speeches by Mullins addressing theological and denominational concerns.

Nettles believes the collection is valuable: "The collection of Mullinseana beyond his famous 'Axioms' makes a compelling read. They focus on Mullins as an interactor with modern thought from a determined Baptist perspective."

In "Baptists and Creeds," discovered in the E.Y. Mullins Collection in the archives of Southern Seminary and likely written between 1920 and 1925, Mohler notes, "Mullins rejected the argument that Baptists have always been a noncreedal people." The essay has never before been published, according to Mohler.

"The essay is an ardent defense of Baptist confessionalism and a warning against hasty or ill-advised creedal revision. With evident concern, Mullins argued that Baptists should 'clear the atmosphere and learn where we are drifting,'" Mohler writes.

"The Dangers and Duties of the Present Hour" is Mullins' first address as president of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1923. A portion of the address, a "Statement on Science and Religion," was adopted by the SBC in 1925 as an addendum to the committee report of "The Baptist Faith and Message." Mohler also included Mullins' explanation of the science-religion statement which was published as an article in the July 15, 1925, edition of The Christian Index, the Georgia Baptist Convention newsjournal of which Mohler once served as editor.

Other articles and speeches in the volume are: "The Jesus of Liberal Theology," "The Response of Jesus Christ to Modern Thought," "Christianity in the Modern World," "Is Jesus Christ the Author of Religious Experience?" "The Theological Trend," "Why I Am a Baptist," "A True Denominationalism"

and "Baptist Theology in the New World Order."

With Timothy and Denise George as its general editors, Broadman & Holman's "Library of Baptist Classics" is an ongoing project to publish "a collection of seminal writings" by Baptist "pastors, theologians, missionary statesmen and denominational leaders," according to the George editorial team.

A version of Mohler's introduction to the Mullins volume is available on the Internet, in the President Mohler section of the Southern Seminary site on the World Wide Web at: www.sbts.edu.

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