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Frederick Holbrook

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ON SEPTEMBER of 1861 Frederick Holbrook became the second Civil War Governor of Vermont after the previous administration of Erastus Fairbanks. As Governor Holbrook explained, the office was "no bed of roses"¹ but in spite of the thorns he was able to realize, according to his *Reminiscences*, three important aims during his two year administration. They were:

1. A "pay as you go" financing of the War
2. A national draft Call in the spring of 1862 instigated by the Governor of Vermont
3. The establishment of a hospital for Vermont's wounded at Brattleboro, Vermont²

The Governor in his nostalgic manner placed these achievements above everything else. However, before we agree with his conclusions, we should review the earlier parts of the Governor's life and the character of the times he lived in. Then, we shall be in a better position to evaluate his role as a Civil War Governor of Vermont.

In *The Harbinger* of 1847 there is described the conservative character of the Brattleboro area, the region in which young Frederick grew up and spent part of his early adult years.

. . . The Green Mountain range, not only divides the State into two great sections, differing in soil and climate, but also in character and customs. The inhabitants of the Eastern portion of Vermont are distinguished by the same traits of character and usages that characterize other New Englanders. They have the same puritanical gravity, that shrewdness and Connecticut peddler's air which enables them to drive a lucrative business in the humblest and most promising pursuits; are full of enterprise and industry; and while they have an apparent niggardliness, which leads them to stick for the last ha'penny in making change, they are honest in dealing and punctual to a fault. The roads through all this portion of the State are fine; fences are in good repair and the houses are snug and neat in appearance.³

1. Frederick Holbrook, *Reminiscences*, 41.

2. *Ibid.*, 43-46.

3. David M. Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont, 1791-1850* (New York, 1939), Quoted from John Orvis, "Letter from Vermont, Ferrisburg, Vermont, June 14, 1847," *The Harbinger* (N.Y. and Boston), July 3, 1847.



FREDERICK HOLBROOK
GOVERNOR OF VERMONT
1861-1863

Settled by people from the lower towns along the Connecticut valley, the conservative character of Brattleboro was strengthened by successive migrations through Brattleboro and along the Connecticut River. In 1795 Frederick's ancestors had come from Massachusetts to Brattleboro where he was born in 1813. At this time, religious awakenings taking place did not noticeably affect the orthodox position of the Congregational Churches on this side of the Green Mountains.⁴ It is no surprise for many settlers had left Massachusetts and Connecticut to get away from the corroding effect of Unitarian movements beginning to dominate the churches in southern New England.

As for the religious training of our Governor, he has devoted most of his *Reminiscences* to describing the impact of the church on his life. Aside from the amusing anecdotes about traveling ministers and their attempts at oratorical grandeur, Frederick Holbrook gained from this period of his development more important religious lessons.

In the opening years of the Nineteenth Century which witnessed a strong humanitarian impulse, the self improving Congregationalists turned to pursuits to improve the lives of themselves and others through the regulation of their environment. People like Thaddeus Fairbanks began to experiment with new methods of weighing things; Frederick Holbrook expressed this new tendency through his writings and experiments in agriculture. Like Benjamin Franklin in his *Autobiography* Mr. Holbrook was not reluctant to emphasize the Puritan virtues at the expense of his religious position. Looking back over the years, he tells the young man aspiring to a successful life to practice the virtues of frugality, industry, and stewardship and to ignore the distracting questions of religion. Nonevangelical, conservative, and moderately Puritan, this is the real character of Holbrook's religious faith. We quickly see this in his hopes for Brattleboro's religious society.

As to the future of our good old Church and Society. . . . I am persuaded that its prosperity and growing influence is to be found in orthodox thought. "Love" rather than avenging punishment, should be the main theme, and I would certainly prefer to err in that direction than in the other. Scripture informs us that "God is love"; and His love, goodness, and mercy stand most abundantly and conspicuously revealed in all His Works—certainly as I see them and as they impress my mind. And the gift of His Divine Son of the imperfect, erring race of man, above all the other merciful attributes of the Father, abundantly certifies the scripture declaration.⁵

When young Frederick reached the proper age, he attended the Berkshire Gymnasium, ranking among the highest in his class. Previously

4. Ludlum, 1-25.

5. Holbrook, *op. cit.*, 54-55.

under the tutelage of Congregational divines, Frederick lost little time in excelling in literature, particularly, and in mathematics. After graduating from the Gymnasium with the good favor of Mark Hopkins, young Holbrook spent several years working in Boston where he not only learned the basic lessons in business, but became a 'man about town.' Undoubtedly, attending the Unitarian Church, King's Chapel, further modified his religious position. Soon Holbrook began to sing in the Handel and Hayden Society. On his return, the men of the Floodwood Company of Brattleboro Town Militia elected him captain.

In 1831 Holbrook took the European tour. A dangerous undertaking, the journey through the agricultural sections of England and France awakened the young man's interest in agricultural techniques far ahead of American methods where Europeans were making better use of their land. As Holbrook came from an area which had been under heavy and inefficient cultivation, the European's economical use of the land suggested possibilities for his own area. This is not surprising; for other foreigners coming to this country at the same time were actively dispensing ideas from English agriculture, so Joseph Schafer states in his *Social History of American Agriculture*.

Holbrook returned in 1833 and engaged in what might be called professional farming. Employing the new methods he observed in Europe, his farm soon became a center of agricultural renown; soon he was asked to write for local journals and newspapers. Eventually, he visited the operations of other farmers, seeing ". . . the best cultivators of land and breeders of horses, cattle, sheep, and swine, making notes of what . . . [he] . . . saw and learned, and writing out the results of their operation for these journals."⁶ It was not long before the editors of the widely read *Albany Cultivator* requested Holbrook to write frequent articles.

Out of his professional farming, his writing for the *Albany Cultivator*, and his wide travels to such farms as those of Daniel Webster, there developed a definite Jeffersonian mode of thought. Basically, the farmer who lived near the land was isolated from the corrupting tendencies of urban life. The farming population, he believed, should be the basic social and economic unit of the country. In his attempts to maintain the small independent landholder, Frederick Holbrook undoubtedly hoped to see a genuine democracy where the political power could be controlled by these people and *not* by a growing class of entrepreneurs.

Perhaps this outline of his political views is an extreme representation, and Holbrook was not quite the Jeffersonian he seemed to be. At the

6. *Ibid.*, 28.

basis of the inconsistency lies his conservative background pitted against his newly acquired scientific and democratic ideals. We might also say that Holbrook's crusading spirit was an expression of a Puritan impulse, humanistically directed to the amelioration of man's environment through basic improvements in his agricultural techniques.

The year 1847 marked the first time Frederick Holbrook assumed a public office. Serving in the Office of Probate of Marlboro, Vermont, he was becoming well known and respected in the area of Brattleboro and Windham County; for two years later the county elected him Senator, along with Peter Dean and John Tufts. In addition to his entrance into state politics in the late 1840s, this time also marked the fruition of several reform movements within the state—the educational acts establishing common schools in Vermont and temperance crusades resulting in stern prohibition laws of the early 1850s. Philanthropic minded entrepreneurs were equalled in their crusading spirit by workingmen's societies formed throughout the state. Soon other people caught the organizing fever, and the State Agricultural Society of Vermont was Frederick Holbrook, elected President of the Society in 1850.

Occupying two positions of influence—Windham County Senator and President of the Agricultural Society—Holbrook brought his Continental ideas on agriculture to bear on the State situation through the medium of 'The Joint Committee Raised to Inquire Into the Expediency of Recommending the Establishment of a "Bureau of Agriculture," in the Department of Interior at Washington.' On Thursday, October 18, 1849, our Senator read to the Vermont Senate a report prepared by the Joint Committee. Urging the establishment of a national bureau of agriculture, he discussed the belated improvements in the agricultural production that could not keep up with increases in Vermont's population, in contrast with the advanced state of agriculture in Europe. Upon further analysis the report indicates that Frederick Holbrook wielded a great amount of influence in this sphere of action while he was a County Senator from Windham County.

Through the following years of the 1850s it is difficult to substantiate exactly what Frederick Holbrook did in addition to his duties as President of the Agricultural Society and as a writer for the Albany *Cultivator*. It seems these activities kept him in the public eye; so that in June 1861 he was just the man the Republican Party needed.

Threatened by the criticism of the Democratic Party and needing a man who could bridge the gap between a rural and a growing urban Vermont, Holbrook was well enough known and moderate enough in his views to attract the widest political following. He won the election

by a great majority; however, it was in the counties of Windsor and Windham that the Democratic candidate, Benjamin Smalley, received the most support. Needless to say, in Caledonia County at that time Democrats were an unknown quantity; Mr. Smalley received only 1 vote to 1993 votes for Frederick Holbrook.

As for Governor Holbrook's administration itself, let us first examine his proposal to finance Vermont's role in the Civil War. To the wisdom of his plan many attest, and even the Governor recognized its overall value.

The action decided on by the Legislature, at my request, in my first message that we pay one-half our War expenses "as we go," leaving the other half to be raised by our successors, resulted in this, that our debt was kept below a point discouraging to the people, and was less at the close of the War than that of any other State, in proportion to aid rendered the Government, and was the first State War Debt paid off in full by any State. And when I say it was less at the close of the War than that of any other State in proportion to aid rendered, it is to be remembered that Vermont sent to the War over ten percent of the population, reckoning in the summary of population both sexes and all ages. The State in addition to all this paid her soldiers seven dollars per month throughout their entire service in the War—which was in addition to their pay from the United States.⁷

With the great sums spent for outfitting the Union soldiers, a large amount went to aid the wives, children, and other dependents of wounded soldiers. For families who had lost their breadwinner, this was no small blessing. Unfortunately, there were those who contrived to make use of the funds by false claims and thus remains the only blight on the record of the Governor's civil servants. Going into strange neighborhoods as lesser leaders of a great crusade, these officers were apparently duped into giving away much money to people who did not qualify. Originating from a basic confusion as to how this system of aid was to work, the people expected if their husbands and sons went to war that the State Government would automatically supplement their livelihood. It is also very interesting that these abuses centered in larger towns as we see from the following report from the Governor.

The labors of the State agent in the larger towns have been arduous and vexatious, occupying much time, in many instances rendered perplexing by the improper claims of families who asserted that their heads enlisted with the promise of the recruiting officer, and others, that the State would support their families.⁸

The Governor goes on to say that the agents themselves expect refunds

7. *Ibid.*, 43.

8. *The Journal of the Senate of the State of Vermont October Session, 1862. Published by Authority.* (Rutland, 1863), 363.

but that he has made no move to reimburse them. In concluding his observations, Holbrook advocates a change in the system to render an equitable distribution of aid. There should be no exceptions for soldiers who are irresponsible enough to let the care of their families fall into the realm of the State's management.

Moving on to what Governor Holbrook considered to be another important achievement of his administration, let us consider his own account from his *Reminiscences* describing his efforts to establish a hospital for the care of Vermont's wounded. Using the information in his *Reminiscences* with information from other sources, we find that for various commentators and for the Governor, himself, the months from December 1861 to June 1862 stand out particularly as the greatest time of his administration. Unfortunately, this period has been discussed to such a degree that most commentators overlook the Governor's more important acts. Coming to believe that President Lincoln was rather cool and moderate when it came to great humanitarian ventures, Governor Holbrook and his staff left Montpelier at the end of December for Washington. From reports of soldiers, the Governor had come to realize that horrible part of the country, the South, was not good for soldiers accustomed to fresh, pure Vermont air. Remembering the Brattleboro hospital which he had helped to establish, he was going to Washington to obtain permission to convert it into an army hospital. After their arrival in Washington the official party established contact with the Secretary of War after many attempts and discussions began.

The Secretary objected strongly on the ground that authorization for such a proposal would be difficult to obtain for a state organization and that Vermont could not possibly supply the physicians and professional staffs to maintain such a hospital. At last, approval did come when the delegation offered to establish the army hospital at its own expense and labor. Their aim in getting the wounded and sick Vermonters nearer home away from Washington could be realized in the early spring when work was finally completed on the hospital. Men began to arrive immediately; soon, the hospital was caring for fifteen hundred to two thousand men at a time. Eventually, the operation involved the humanitarian instincts of many Vermonters in an effort to provide food and dressings for the patients. A high rate of cures becoming standard, the hospital was inspected by federal medical boards, and as a result, the Federal Government resumed the operation of the hospital after reimbursing the State for its initial undertaking.⁹ Here was true evidence again of what our moderate Governor could do if he set out to make the

9. *The Vermonter* (White River Junction, Vermont, 1896), 1, 12.

leaders in Washington listen. His actions expressed his humanitarian urge to improve the lot of his fellowmen, but they outweighed his ability to manipulate the Legislators. The spectre of no important and creative militia legislation still loomed over the closing months of his administration.

In order not to give the impression that Governor Holbrook was neglecting his most pressing duties as "Captain-General and Commander-in-Chief of the Forces of the State," the definition of the Governor's military duties in the State Constitution of Vermont, we should follow his activities after the Legislative Session in 1861 and, more particularly, in the early months of 1862. We quickly realize that he was well aware of the threat to the Union States.

The months of 1862 were occupied with Governor Holbrook's calling into action various regiments and brigades. As early as November 1861, agencies to recruit the Seventh and Eighth Regiments and the First and Second Batteries of Artillery were set up throughout the state at the insistence of the Governor (of course with Legislature's approval). In January 1862 these troops left for the Department of the Gulf where they would see action at Baton Rouge and Vicksburg. Later in the spring of 1862, when Washington was threatened, the newly recruited Ninth Regiment was sent to Washington. June marked a low ebb for the Union forces in their retreat from Richmond which forced the Governor to call up a Tenth Regiment of Infantry. Also, necessary recruitment was going on to replenish the ranks of Vermont's soldiers in the South. Precisely at this time in the late spring and summer of 1862 Governor Holbrook demonstrated how he could influence the Union recruitment on more than the state level. It appears, and it is confirmed by several writers, that the Governor wrote to President Lincoln indicating what the real attitude of the New England governors would be toward a call of troops. With "weaned affections" is the Governor's following account of the eventual outcome of his efforts to raise more troops in New England.

The call in 1862 for 300,000 three-years' volunteers, followed very soon after in that year for 300,000 nine-months' men, resulted from a letter I wrote to the President earnestly and frankly setting forth the fact, well known to us, from my point of outlook, that a very large additional force was immediately needed to crush the rebellion, and urging him at once a call for 500,000 three-years' volunteers, assuring him that the people of the loyal states would respond to such a call; and that if the Government hesitated from lack of funds to arm and equip so large a force, then, so far as Vermont was concerned the State would arm and equip its quota of such Call to the acceptance of such military Inspector as the Government might appoint, and would wait on the Government for reimbursement at such

time as it should be in funds. On receiving my letter, the President, Secretary of War, and Provost Marshall General, Simon Draper, had a session over it at the Secretary's office, the President taking out my letter and saying—"I have a letter from Governor Holbrook of Vermont which solves all out doubts and difficulties about calling for more men." General Draper was immediately dispatched to Vermont to call on and confer with me, and have such a paper formulated as I thought the loyal Governors would be willing to sign, recommending and endorsing such a call for men, and General Draper appearing at my office two days after, such a paper was agreed upon, and such of the other Governors as he could personally see on his way back to Washington signed the paper recommending the Call, and all other Governors were communicated with by wire, and by wire consented to have their names added to the recommendation, and so within a week after the Call was published, with the endorsement of it by every loyal supporter. While these preparations for issuing the Call were in progress at Washington, Governor Richard Yates of Illinois, not yet knowing what steps were being taken to reinforce the Union Army, wrote a desponding letter to President Lincoln about the discouraging aspects of the War. He was a brother lawyer and intimate friend of Mr. Lincoln's and so the President, in his characteristic way, at once telegraphed this reply to Governor Yates's letter—"Wait a little, Dick, and see the salvation of the Lord." Within a day or two after, Governor Yates received the Call for more Volunteers.

On receiving the Call I at once wrote to the President again, thanking him for the Call, but expressed the opinion that it should have been for a larger number of men, and hoping it would be succeeded very soon by another Call, for I felt certain they would be needed to bring the War to a close. Very soon after the Call for 300,000 nine months' men did come. These two Calls brought the War to a close.¹⁰

One achievement which Holbrook did not list among his three most important was the manner and result of his getting to know Secretary of War Stanton and President Lincoln. By the opening months of 1863, Governor Holbrook had contacted both the Secretary of War and the President enough times to easily compare the two leaders.

My relations with President Lincoln and Secretary of War Stanton were intimate and pleasant, and I always found them ready to oblige me officially in whatever I requested them to do, for I was always particular not to ask anything of them which they could not properly grant or the granting of which would embarrass them in their relations with other State officials. There was quite a characteristic contrast between the two men, but the very contrast added to the effectiveness of their official action, the President's caution and sagacity being pushed forward by the Secretary's ardor and impetuosity, and the latter calmed by the broad common sense and forecast of the former. Both temperaments combined were sometimes more effective than either one could have been. Both were alike in intense, untiring loyalty to the Union.¹¹

10. Holbrook, *op. cit.*, 43-45.

11. *Ibid.*, 46.

In the course of 1862 and 1863 Governor Holbrook developed a deep admiration for President Lincoln. Through a limited correspondence with the President, the Governor generally understood the man's character and political methods. Nostalgically romanticizing on the person of Lincoln in his later *Reminiscences*, the Governor unconsciously saw in Lincoln a great expression of those qualities inherent in himself. Curiously, the Governor emphasized the humanitarian side of Lincoln's character and his alert and literate mind. In the following poem included in his *Reminiscences* there is indicated the impact of Lincoln as a man and as a mind.

His was no lonely mountain peak of mind,
Thrusting to thin air o'er our cloudy bars,
A sea-mark now, now lost in vapors blind;
Broad prairie rather, genial, level-lined,
Fruitful and friendly for all human kind,
Nothing of Europe here,
Here was a type of the true older race,
And one of Plutarch's men talked with us
face to face.¹²

The great intellectual triumph of Lincoln's Gettysburg address impressed Holbrook as an expression of the man's "breadth and reach of his mind." Yet, Holbrook realized Abraham Lincoln was great for other reasons. What set off Lincoln from other men was his "Uncommon combination of plain *everydayness* and force, forecast and ability."¹³ Interestingly enough, as an agricultural writer and experimenter and as a man interested in preserving the roots of Jeffersonian democracy, Frederick Holbrook found in Abraham Lincoln those qualities that he could admire the most.

President Lincoln repeatedly urged me to write to him, frankly and freely, and I was not unfrequently prompted to do so, always getting a prompt reply thanking me for my letter. He used to say to me, "What I particularly desire to know is what the 'plain people', " as he liked to call them, "Think and wish done, and to carry out their views and wishes so far as I possibly can. Amid the conflicting opinions and counsels with which I am surrounded in Washington, I am at times at a loss to know how to act. But when I can hear direct from the 'plain people', I feel new strength for the warfare before me."¹⁴

Lincoln's sense of humor appealed to the conservative Governor and lightened the burdens of office. Lacking the political experience

12. *Ibid.*, 47.

13. *Ibid.*, 47.

14. *Ibid.*, 47.

and ability possessed by Lincoln, Governor Holbrook could admire Lincoln's techniques for what they were.

His many anecdotes, little stories and sententious replies to individuals and delegations calling to advise or expostulate with him about some feature of the management of the War, all the more effective from being so unique and homely, were as wine to his own spirits under the discouragements and of much to the people cheering their despondency, letting in new light, and waking renewed faith in the ultimate success.¹⁵

The greatest disappointment of the Holbrook Administration was the fact that he—the Governor—was unable to effect any major legislative changes in the militia laws of the state. Arriving on the scene as the man of moderate temper, the Governor did lead the State through that period of the War that required the all encompassing idealism which he offered in his speeches and proclamations. However, it was up to the following Governor, John Gregory Smith, of St. Albans, to effect the necessary changes in the militia organization of the State. Holbrook's failure to push through this kind of legislation brought upon him stinging criticism from the press and from letters from soldiers on the "front" who really felt the injustices of the outmoded militia system.

The defects of the self enrollment system were great enough to produce draft riots. On June 17, the Provost Marshall of Rutland was forced to apprehend a blacksmith, Jerry Conwell, employed at the Adam and Allen Marble Quarry in West Rutland. As Conwell had failed to give any information concerning his status for enrollment or to sign any enrollment papers, the local enrollment officer had reported him to the Provost Marshall. When the latter arrived at the quarry, Conwell was nowhere to be found; and just as the Marshall and his party left the quarry in despair, they were assaulted by a man with a club. Warding off their first assailant, the party was then surrounded by a group of two hundred men who immediately began to hurl marble chips at them. The flying marble chips forced them to take refuge behind their wagon, and before they could get away the Provost Marshall shot several times into the advancing crowd of men.¹⁶ William Ripley, at home in Rutland Center that summer, provides the following description of the effects of the prevailing military system.

Center Rutland
June 18, 1863

Dear Gen. Stannard:

Our friend Captain Crane has fought and lost his first battle. *On the quarries there are about 6 or 7 hundred men who have organized to resist the*

15. *Ibid.*, 47-48.

16. Rutland Weekly *Herald* (Rutland, Vermont, 1863), July 2, 1863.

draft. They now refuse to give the enrolling officer their names. Yesterday Crane went over personally to get the names and ages of these men and was attacked by them with stones and driven off. The official list of killed and wounded has not yet been published though loss of material is confined, so far as known, to the hat of the enrolling officer. Crane has gone to Montpelier today to consult with Gen'l. Pitcher and surely [will] come back and take the names of the Irishmen. I fully expect that we shall have a little fight here.

Crane is said to have behaved well over there. He tried hard to shoot the ringleader, but was overpowered and carried off by his own posse, after having emptied his revolver. His blood is fully up and he is bound to put this thing through.

Truly yours,
Wm. V. W. Ripley¹⁷

In a letter to his brother 'Ed' on the 'front' at the time, William Ripley registered the local consequences of the riot.

Well, Crane got two hundred men, the presence of which force developed such a wonderful amount of courage in our town people that they immediately set to work and formed a Home Guard. They drill every night.¹⁸

When the Republican Convention met in the summer of 1863 to choose its next candidate for the upcoming election in September of that year, Frederick Holbrook's name was hardly mentioned. Precedent was against him. It had been the custom of the party to choose its candidate from Western Vermont when the previous Governor came from the Eastern areas and vice versa. In addition, there seemed to be a definite opposition to having one man in office for more than two years. More particularly, it appears that Governor Frederick Holbrook was a victim of changing times and circumstances. The views of Governor Holbrook no longer suited the aspirations of the rising class of Vermont industrialists. What was needed was a political leader to give voice to the urban and industrial population that were beginning to assume more and insistent influence on the Vermont scene. Thus, John Gregory Smith, former President of the Northern Pacific Railroad, was the man who could satisfy these groups in the coming two years—not Frederick Holbrook, the politician of agrarian reform. The Convention's eventual nomination of John Gregory Smith marked the demise of the Jeffersonian politician from state politics. Finally, during the Republican Convention of 1863 which lasted only two days, the final tribute paid to Governor Holbrook was of little significance in com-

17. Otto Eisenschiml, ed., *Vermont General: The Unusual War Experiences of Edward Hastings Ripley 1862-1865* (New York, 1960), 129.

18. *Ibid.*, 134.

parison to his three greatest achievements. The delegates voted only a resolution of "thanks," nothing more; and in the extensive reports of the meeting they made no other mention of the noteworthy man.

Frederick Holbrook stepped down from the Governor's chair in October of 1863 and returned to private life in Brattleboro where he directed the activities of the Brattleboro Savings Bank in various capacities. As a member of the Board of Trustees, he continued to lend his counsel for the operation of the Brattleboro Retreat. In later years it appears he became once again interested in literature and writing for his own pleasure. Before his death in 1909, he produced his *Reminiscences*.

In conclusion, we should note a subtle change which occurred in the religious thought of Frederick Holbrook while he was a Civil War Governor of Vermont. Although his public addresses do not register the change, these personal *Reminiscences* do convey the culminating developments in his religious thought. During his administration, he proclaimed that war was mainly a discipline and a crusade to improve others and to uphold the democratic ideals. The Civil War subtly and unmistakably modified and hardened these ideals. For him, the War became a justification for imposing one's belief on others and not a grand effort to improve the situation of man through rational means. In the final analysis, the War transformed our moderate Governor into a staunch warrior for the faith who did not hesitate to invoke the virtues of armed force and war.

Still, we must never forget to honor and reverence those ancient Worthies who, living in a more benighted and degraded age of the world, when Christians had to live a life of warfare with the framers of darkness, and were naturally compelled to be warriors for the Christian faith and religion, which state of warfare colored and made more or less austere their doctrinal views of Christianity.¹⁹

19. Holbrook, *op. cit.*, 57.

