

Liberales Theologie heute Liberal Theology Today

Herausgegeben von
JÖRG LAUSTER
ULRICH SCHMIEDEL
PETER SCHÜZ

Dogmatik in der Moderne

27

Mohr Siebeck

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Christian Danz, Jörg Dierken, Hans-Peter Großhans
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ISBN 978-3-16-157660-7 / eISBN 978-3-16-157661-4

DOI 10.1628/978-3-16-157661-4

ISSN 1869-3962 / eISSN 2569-3913 (Dogmatik in der Moderne)

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliographie; detaillierte bibliographische Daten sind über <http://dnb.dnb.de> abrufbar.

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Das Buch wurde von Laupp & Göbel in Gomaringen gesetzt, auf alterungsbeständiges Werkdruckpapier gedruckt und von der Buchbinderei Nädele in Nehren gebunden.

Printed in Germany.

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Liberaler Theologie heute: Zur Einführung

JÖRG LAUSTER

Mit dem Namen „Liberaler Theologie“ verbindet sich der Aufbruch protestantischer Strömungen im 19. Jahrhundert, die sich um eine Vermittlung zwischen der Moderne und dem Christentum bemüht haben. Der Name selbst wurde von den meisten Vertretern anfangs wenig geschätzt und kaum als Selbstbezeichnung gebraucht, weil er offensichtlich Anlass zu dem Missverständnis bot, den theologischen Aufbruch allzu rasch in die Nähe des politischen oder gar wirtschaftlichen Liberalismus zu rücken. Gleichwohl etablierte sich der Name für eine theologische Haltung, die an einer modernen Transformation des Christentums arbeitete. Diese Transformationen können vielfältig ausfallen, darum ist die Unschärfe des Begriffs „Liberaler Theologie“ eine chronische Begleiterscheinung. Doch trotz seiner vielen Kritiker ist der Begriff niemals ganz verschwunden. Offensichtlich ist an dem Programm liberaler Theologie etwas von bleibender Anziehungskraft für alle jene, die Christentum und eine zwar nicht unkritische, aber letztlich doch positive Bewertung der Moderne in Einklang bringen möchten. Vom 18. bis 21. Juli 2018 fand an der Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München die internationale Tagung „Liberaler Theologie heute. Liberal Theology Today“ statt. Sie sollte Gelegenheit zu einer Bestandsaufnahme bieten und die gegenwärtigen Herausforderungen ausloten. In welchen Kontexten bezieht man sich wie auf das Programm liberaler Theologie, welche Ideen kommen darin zum Vorschein und was lässt sich daraus an Zukunftsmöglichkeiten des Christentums ableiten?

Ein besonderes Interesse lag von dieser konzeptionellen Ausrichtung her auf der internationalen Perspektive. Galt die liberale Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert als ein vorrangig deutsches Phänomen, so ist sie doch bald zu einem internationalen Faktor geworden. Der Blick auf die verschiedenen Entwicklungen ist lehrreich, denn es lässt sich erkennen, welche unterschiedlichen Impulse liberale Theologie freisetzen konnte. In den USA (Dorrien) verbindet sich spätestens in der zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts das liberale Programm mit den Aufbrüchen verschiedener Befreiungstheologien. Die ursprüngliche emanzipatorische Kraft liberaler Theologie nimmt damit eine eminent politische Gestalt an, die sie in Deutschland so nie besessen hat. Noch heute sind sich hierzulande liberale Theologie und politischer Protestantismus nicht zwingend freundlich gesonnen. Die amerikanischen Entwicklungen geben zu bedenken, dass beide Strömungen eine gemeinsame Wurzel haben könnten. Deutlich anders sind die Wege liberaler Theologie in den protestantisch geprägten Regionen Europas verlaufen. In Schweden (Svenungs-

son, Uggla), in den Niederlanden (Benjamins) und in Großbritannien (Chapman), die als traditionell liberale und offene Länder gelten, hat die liberale Theologie ein offensichtlich jeweils recht wechselvolles Schicksal durchlaufen. Gemeinsam ist all diesen Entwicklungen, dass voranschreitende Säkularisierungsprozesse dem liberalen Programm zum Verhängnis geworden sind. Wenn die Moderne als Bedrohung des Christlichen erlebt wird, dann bringt das vor allem von kirchlicher Seite die Idee einer Verständigung zwischen Moderne und christlicher Religion in Misskredit. Das liberale Programm wird dann als Aushöhlung und Gefährdung des eigentlich Christlichen erlebt – eine Tendenz, die sich im Übrigen auch in den liberalen Phobien vieler Kirchenleitungen des deutschsprachigen Protestantismus beobachten lässt. War die liberale Theologie einst ein Entwurf, das Christentum vor der Enge einer bloßen Verkirklichung zu bewahren, dann ist der Rückzug hinter die Kirchenmauern die folgerichtige Gegenbewegung gegen ein liberales Christentum.

Während sich der einstmals liberale Flügel des Anglikanismus bis heute scheinbar kaum von diesem Geltungsverlust erholt hat (Chapman), zeichnen sich in Skandinavien und den Niederlanden interessante Aufbrüche ab. Kulturelle, politische und ethische Gründe werden dafür ins Feld geführt, dass liberale Grundideen dazu beitragen können, die allzu schematische Unterscheidung zwischen „religiös“ auf der einen und „säkular“ auf der anderen Seite zu überwinden (Svenungsson). Es ist nicht einzusehen, wie das Christentum zum Funktionieren moderner Gesellschaften seinen Beitrag leisten soll, wenn es sich mit schlichten Innen-oder-außen-Operationen zu positionieren versucht. Bemerkenswert und für eine deutsche Perspektive horizonsweiternd sind die neuen inhaltlichen Akzente, die sich mit diesen Aufbrüchen liberaler Theologie verbinden. Diese werden weniger aus der Relecture der Klassiker bezogen, sondern aus theologischen Ideen aktueller Debatten. Das kann einerseits eine Neubesinnung auf die Schöpfungslehre sein (Uggla) oder eine Transformation klassischer Gotteskonzeptionen im Gespräch mit der Prozesstheologie (Benjamins, Dorrien). Ein besonderes Schlaglicht auf den globalen Stellenwert wirft die ostasiatische Perspektive. Als Konzept haftet der liberalen Theologie der Dünkel des Kolonialismus an. Sie steht für eine Gruppensemantik, der für die zu bewältigenden Aufgaben eines Christentums in Asien offensichtlich nicht viel zugetraut wird. Darin wird allerdings vorschnell übersehen, welche Anknüpfungspunkte zu kontextuellen Theologien das liberale Programm bereithält (Kim). Es wäre sicher eine lohnende Aufgabe künftiger Zusammenarbeit, vorhandene Klischees zu überwinden und das wechselseitige Inspirationspotential zu erkunden, das liberale Theologie europäischer Prägung im Gespräch mit südamerikanischen, afrikanischen und asiatischen Theologien entfalten kann.

Die historische Perspektive auf die Wurzeln und Herkunft liberaler Theologie ist stets ein Bestandteil ihrer inhaltlichen Selbstvergewisserung gewesen. Die in diesem Band versammelten Beiträge lenken den Blick jenseits der großen Grün-

dergestalt des 19. Jahrhunderts. Versteht man liberale Theologie nicht allein als eine historische Epoche, sondern als eine theologische Haltung, dann gibt es gute Gründe ihre Vorformen bereits in dem sittlichen Bildungsprogramm Philipp Melanchthons (Armbruster), im Toleranzgebot der englischen Aufklärung (Svensson) und in den Freiheitsforderungen der Französischen Revolution (Zuber) auszumachen. Zur historischen Vergewisserung gehört auch die Profilschärfung an den Rändern. An Ralph Waldo Emerson lässt sich untersuchen, wie sich seine Form einer säkularen Religion zum Programm der liberalen Theologie verhält (Arndt). Delikat, aber unumgänglich ist die Frage nach der Einordnung von Denkern wie z. B. Emanuel Hirsch. Mit den basalen Grundoperationen seiner Theologie hat er durchaus Einfluss auf das liberale Programm ausgeübt, in der realen Durchführung wird man ihn jedoch keinesfalls als liberal bezeichnen können (Barniske, Lademann). Eine Erinnerung an die starke Tradition des Schweizer Liberalismus (Rohls) weitet den Blick ebenso wie die Perspektive auf Darstellungsfragen des liberalen Programms (Schüz, Rossa). Das Verhältnis des Katholizismus zum Liberalismus – sei es zum eigenen, sei es zum protestantischen – böte mühelos Stoff für eine eigene Tagung, wenigstens ein Hinweis auf die Haltung Joseph Ratzingers eröffnet einen Ausblick (Baudry).

Die liberale Theologie hat von ihren Anfängen an stets Kritiker auf den Plan gerufen. Konfessionalistische, neoorthodoxe und schließlich auch fundamentalistische Stimmen halten die Annäherung an die Moderne für einen Ausverkauf des Christlichen, atheistische und säkularistische Denker hingegen sehen in ihr eine Reduktion und letztlich aussichtslose Ermäßigung der Zumutungen christlichen Denkens, gewissermaßen einen Versuch, sich modernem Denken durch Rückzug anzubiedern. Von diesen beiden entgegengesetzten Punkten kann man liberale Theologie entweder nur als Verrat oder als Flucht begreifen. Solche groben Verzeichnungen helfen nicht weiter. Erfreulicherweise bewegt sich anspruchsvolle Kritik auf einem subtileren Niveau und lenkt den Blick auf tatsächliche Schwachstellen und blinde Flecken, die zu bearbeiten für eine künftig wirkungsvolle liberale Theologie unerlässlich ist. Stets zu ringen hat liberale Theologie mit dem Dammbrech-Argument, im Englischen „slippery slope“ (Andrejč). Zu den neueren Herausforderungen dürfte es zählen, ihre Profilschärfe im interreligiösen Dialog auszuloten (von Stosch). Es ist offensichtlich, dass sich aktuelle Erscheinungsformen liberaler Theologie wie alle gedanklichen Bewegungen wesentlich auch über Abgrenzungen definieren. Darin kann freilich auch eine Falle liegen. Ihre berechtigte Kritik an erstarrten und auch überkommenen Formen kirchlicher Praxis kann selbst in einer Erstarrung der eigenen Perspektive enden. Die Frage steht im Raum, ob bestimmte Formen der Kritik der Verkirchlichung des Christentums letztendlich nicht auch das Kind mit dem Bade ausschütten und keine produktiven Ausblicke bieten (Karle). Tatsächlich dürfte die entscheidende Frage sein, wie sich die an einem freieren Religionsbegriff orientierten Ansatzpunkte liberaler Theologie in Gestaltungsvorschläge kirchlicher Praxis überführen lassen.

Wenig weiterführend sind auch theologiegeschichtliche Frontstellungen gegenüber Positionen einer Wort-Gottes-Theologie, die so nicht einmal mehr von den wenigstens klügeren Anhängern dieser Strömung vertreten werden (Stoellger). Das ermutigt zu einer Revision und Aktualisierung der religionsphilosophischen Grundlegung, die zugleich auch einen neuen liberalen Zugang zu materialdogmatischen Themen ermöglicht. Es sei noch einmal daran erinnert, dass sich hier die internationale Perspektive als außerordentlich hilfreich erweist, da sich dort interessante inhaltliche Aufbrüche beobachten lassen. Das dürfte auch dazu beitragen, der bisweilen berechtigten Kritik der inhaltlichen Profillosigkeit zu begegnen. Diesem Manko sollte man nicht mit schnellen und einfachen Antworten entgegentreten wollen – daran hat die Welt unserer Tage fürwahr keinen Mangel. Liberale Theologie ist immer auch der Modus einer religiösen Nachdenklichkeit. Es ist ein der Sache dienlicher und verfolgungswerter Hinweis, wieder mehr die Aufmerksamkeit auf die Fragen zu lenken, auf die christliche Lehrbestände eine Antwort geben wollen (Sommer).

Die kritischen Anfragen führen von selbst hinüber zu den Ideen und Zukunftsmöglichkeiten liberaler Theologie. So wichtig die Vergewisserung der eigenen Ursprünge auch ist, das zukünftige Potential liberaler Theologie wird entscheidend von den transformativen Kräften abhängen. Die ästhetische Transformation ist mit Blick auf die gegenwärtigen Debatten ein ebenso ernst zu nehmender Vorschlag (Buntfuß) wie die Besinnung auf die denkerischen Anstrengungen und die sich daraus ergebenden theologischen Möglichkeiten, die in einer Reaktualisierung negativer Theologie liegen (Halfwassen). Vorschläge zu einer Neukonzeption klassischer liberaler Themen wie Geist (Danz) und Freiheit (Laube) sind in diesem Zusammenhang unerlässlich. Ein zweifelsohne schwieriges Terrain ist der Beitrag liberaler Theologie zu Gestaltungsfragen, da hier die chronische Profillosigkeit besonders virulent zu werden droht. Möglichkeiten eines liberalen Profils loten Beiträge zur Ethik (Anselm) und zur Politik (Schmiedel) aus. Der Blick auf die kirchliche Praxis – von Kritikern ja stets als schwache Seite liberaler Theologie gebrandmarkt – rückt zum einen Möglichkeiten und Grenzen liberaler Predigt-Programme in den Blick (Schmidt) und fragt zum anderen, wie sich das liberale Programm zu den Spiritualitätsformen der Spätmoderne verhält (Piety). Wie grundsätzlich ein liberales Programm Praktischer Theologie aussehen könnte, entfaltet der abschließende Beitrag des Bandes (Albrecht).

Dank der Beiträge der Vortragenden und der sich anschließenden Diskussionen ist der Tagung eine profunde Bestandsaufnahme gelungen, was liberale Theologie ist, was sie sein und worin ihr Beitrag zu den Themen unserer Zeit liegen könnte. Für die Weiterarbeit an dem Programm eines liberalen Christentums in globaler Perspektive bieten die Beiträge unverzichtbare Anregungen.

Die Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität hat die Durchführung der Tagung ermöglicht und sich darin einmal mehr als ein international exzellenter Wissenschafts-

standort erwiesen. Dafür gilt unser herzlicher Dank. Im Namen der Herausgeber danke ich Marieluise Clotz und Mario Berkefeld für die Unterstützung bei der Erstellung des Tagungsbandes. Ein besonderer Dank gilt Barbara Rappenglück, die sowohl die Tagung als auch den vorliegenden Band in außerordentlich konstruktiver Weise betreut hat.

I.

Liberales Theologie in internationaler Perspektive
Liberal Theology from International Perspectives

Theology in a Liberationist Liberal Spirit

A Post-Hegelian Perspective

GARY DORRIEN

I will begin by historicizing our subject in the contexts of British, German, and U.S. American history, say a word about liberal theology as something that endures from one generation to another, and close with a word about my own version of it. England had the first trickle of theologies of a liberalizing sort and a nineteenth century tradition of mildly liberal theology, but no movement of the real thing until the end of the nineteenth century. Germany produced all the great founding liberal theologies, and movements that propagated them. The USA sprouted an historic tradition of liberal theology in the mid-eighteenth century, interrogating English traditions at the same time that Germans launched their own, but the first American liberal theology was liberal Congregationalist, not Anglican.¹

In all these contexts, religion was distinctly problematic for liberal ideology. To the liberal traditions associated with John Locke and Immanuel Kant, the liberal state was naturally tolerant by virtue of deriving from a rational social contract, it existed to protect the natural rights of citizens, and religion had to be constrained by modern rationality. Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin espoused a liberalism of this sort in the USA, where it competed with a latter-day Puritan notion deriving from John Milton that the state has a sacred duty to protect liberty – the seed of what became the American social gospel.

The idea that there is such a thing as an individual, and the corollary that this individual is endowed universally with sacred dignity, both came from Christianity. These ideas did not come from anywhere else, a point that mattered to the founding Christian liberals who prized the principle of individual freedom. Liberalism is fundamentally about liberty – the dignity and freedom of the individual person. Historically and theoretically, the cornerstone of liberalism is the assertion of the supreme value and universal rights of the individual person. Locke, Kant,

¹ For works on the themes of this chapter, see DORRIEN, GARY, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805–1900*, Louisville 2001, DORRIEN, GARY, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900–1950*, Louisville 2003, DORRIEN, GARY, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, and Postmodernity, 1950–2005*, Louisville 2006, DORRIEN, GARY, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit: The Idealistic Logic of Modern Theology*, Chichester 2012, and DORRIEN, GARY, *In a Post-Hegelian Spirit: Religious Philosophy as Idealistic Discontent*, forthcoming.

and Jefferson taught that the universal goal of human beings is to realize their freedom and that state power is justified only to the extent that it enables and protects individual liberty.

But the liberal rhetoric of freedom was shot through with hypocrisy everywhere that it sprouted, because precious few liberals included all human beings in the rights of humanity. Liberalism arose as an ideological justification of capitalism and as tolerant relief from the religious wars of the seventeenth century. Liberals designed a political regime protecting the supposedly natural interests of the capitalist class. The liberal state tolerated plural religious traditions, which led to the separation of church and state, which led eventually to tolerating other kinds of belief. The state, under liberalism, became an ostensibly neutral guarantor of the rights of individuals and communities to pursue diverse conceptions of the good life, but liberals partly or wholly disqualified from their rights persons who were not white, male, and owners of property like themselves. The exceptional liberals who opposed all such exclusions and hypocrisy had to be called radical liberals or liberal socialists to distinguish them from what liberalism usually meant. Liberalism was better known for protecting the business class and white supremacy than for defending the oppressed and vulnerable.

Liberal theology arose as an aspect of this story. In Germany, the Kantians contended that they were the only true liberals. I agree with Friedrich Wilhelm Graf that we should linger over this fact, but if I do so tonight I will never get to my talk. Subsequent usage was more expansive, and I shall adopt for tonight's purpose the convention of counting as liberal the schools of Kant, Schleiermacher, Hegel, Ritschl, and Troeltsch, plus similar traditions in Britain and the USA.

Kantian theologians grounded Christian truth entirely in the moral concerns of practical reason, conceiving theology as freethinking critical reflection on moral faith. Religion is important as support for moral religion, and false and distracting as anything else. The school of Schleiermacher said that religion is about awe, mystery, and the infinite, not moral control. Kantian philosophy is mostly correct, but Kantian religion is superficial. The essence of religion is religious feeling (*Gefühl*). All religions construe the whence of human existence and dependence, and Christianity is about the experience of redemption in Jesus Christ, which is individual *and* the collective experience of the Christian church. The school of Hegel said it was disastrous for theologians to reduce the truth of Christianity to their feelings about it. Hegel's system rehabilitated the Christian worldview on modern terms. Christianity is a picture story about the movement of self-certain Spirit abandoning its unity nature to embrace the suffering of the world and return to itself. It apprehends in pictorial form the universal process by which Spirit redeems the world by desiring, sundering, suffering, reconciling, and coming to know itself.

All three of these schools and most of the mediating versions of them were theologically liberal as defined by the six planks that have defined this category

through the centuries and from place to place. Until the modern era, every Christian theology operated within a house of authority. Liberal theology broke away from authority-based religious thinking by (1) refusing to establish or compel religious beliefs on the basis of a bare authority claim, (2) seeking a third way between orthodox over-belief and secular disbelief, (3) accepting biblical criticism, (4) allowing science to explain the physical world, (5) looking beyond the church for answers, and (6) seeking to make faith relevant to the modern world.

These six planks effectively define what liberal theology has been and still is. But no essential anything truly passes from one time and place to another, and there was a seventh plank that played a fateful role in modern theology: the social consciousness of the Progressive era. In theology it was variously called social Christianity, Christian socialism, or the social gospel, and it played out differently in England, Germany, and the USA. In England, Christian socialism was overwhelmingly Anglo-Catholic and liberal theology was rationalistic and elitist. In Germany, liberal theology became wholly identified with Culture Protestantism, the civil religion of an expanding German Empire, which set up liberal theology for a devastating crash. In the USA, the social gospel was politically activist, mostly progressive, and fused completely with liberal theology, permanently redefining what is called “liberal theology” in the USA.

The American social gospel, like its European counterparts, was a mixture of radical, progressive, and conservative social reformers, but in America the social gospel was a cultural earthquake that should be called the Third Great Awakening. It had a broader, deeper, and more lasting impact on churches than was true anywhere in Europe. Liberal theology preceded the social gospel by more than a century in the United States. Then it surged into the churches through the social gospel. White social gospel leaders such as Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch and black social gospel leaders such as Reverdy Ransom and Adam Clayton Powell Sr. said it made no sense to be one without the other.

That is not what happened in Britain, where there was very little crossover between liberal theology and Christian socialism. England had a mildly liberalizing theological tradition associated with Frederick Denison Maurice, Thomas Arnold, Frederick Temple, and B. F. Westcott that kept alive the Broad Church option in the Church of England. But full-fledged liberal theology was not allowed in the Church of England until the late 1890s. The spectacular backlash against a liberal book in 1860, *Essays and Reviews*, extinguished six-plank liberalism as a possibility for nearly forty years. The first organization espousing full-fledged liberal theology in England was the Churchman’s Union for the Advancement of Liberal Religious Thought, founded in 1898. It was rationalistic, elitist, and fixed on doctrines it did not believe, though with a churchy ethos. It reflected the long-time repression of liberal theology in the Church of England and contributed almost nothing to the Christian socialist movement, a mostly Anglo-Catholic phenomenon sprinkled with a few mildly liberal theologians in the Maurice tradition.

Meanwhile the German and American traditions of liberal theology had the Ritschlian School in common, which played out very differently. In Germany, every liberal school preceding the founding of the empire in 1871 claimed to give historical consciousness its due without really doing so. The schools of Kant, Schleiermacher, Hegel, and the mediating versions of them said that historical criticism is valuable and necessary to a point. It deconstructs superstitious traditions and ascertains historical probabilities. The Kantians thought they were covered on this subject because they invented historical criticism in the first place. Johann Semler, Johann Eichhorn, and Johann Griesbach deconstructed the history of the text in the 1760s. They studied the Bible from a scientific standpoint ostensibly stripped of dogmatic premises, revolutionizing biblical scholarship by deciphering the historical development of the Bible. They had no nation, yet they had far more historical consciousness than scholars from the mighty nations of England and France. The German founders of historical criticism were the first to call themselves “liberal theologians,” until Kant came along in the early 1780s, after which they called themselves Kantians. Heinrich Paulus, Wilhelm de Wette, and other Kantians took pride in their historicism without believing it established good theology. Historical criticism was just a tool, and mostly negative. Kantians, the Schleiermacher school, and Hegelians were careful not to contradict whatever came from historical criticism, but the establishing role belonged to something else: moral faith, or religious experience, or the truth of Christian ideas.

Hegel was especially quotable about the non-establishing role of historicism. He said he respected what historical critics did with ancient texts and not what they did with religious truth, for historical knowledge is pitifully low grade. To be a theologian and aspire to mere historicism is as pitiful as you can get. It is to adopt the mentality of a counting-house clerk. A clerk keeps the ledgers and accounts of other people’s wealth. At least Kant and Schleiermacher spoke out of something they knew personally. Hegel let Hegelian theologians decide how much they needed to believe about past historical events. But historicist theology was the most pitifully shallow and reductionist strategy of them all.

This conviction grated on Albrecht Ritschl, whose followers swept the field of theology in the late nineteenth century. Ritschl combined Kant on moral religion, Schleiermacher on religious experience, and the bourgeois social consciousness of his generation. He argued that historical criticism establishes the essence of Christianity – the kingdom of God as valued by the Christian community. Theology rightly concerns itself with the collective Christian experience of value inspired by Jesus, but the kingdom is valued as absolute only by those who follow Jesus. Outsiders do not care what Jesus taught. Thus, Christian truth cannot be grasped outside the Christian community, for Christian faith is knowable only to faith. The Ritschlian School swept the field by embracing historical consciousness, reclaiming the kingdom-oriented religion of Jesus, accepting Kant’s division of knowl-

edge, stressing the irreducible autonomy of faith, and touting the contribution of religion to society.

This strategy was practical and anti-metaphysical, providing theological ballast for Culture Protestantism. The Ritschlian School was comfortably ensconced in the churches, academy, and government. It debated Ritschl's historicism, judging that he got it approximately right (Adolf Harnack), or took it too far (Wilhelm Herrmann), or did not take it far enough (Ernst Troeltsch). It grappled similarly with Ritschl's attempt to expunge metaphysics from theology, judging that he got it right (Harnack), or did not go far enough (Herrmann), or was wrong to try (Troeltsch).

Liberal theology in its Ritschlian heyday espoused an optimistic progress religion that crashed spectacularly in Germany after World War I, becoming an object of ridicule. Later a similar story played out in the USA, with less drama, since the American version had nothing to do with losing a war. In both cases, liberal theology has had a fateful history to overcome.

Two dominant ways of construing liberal theology flowed from what Karl Barth and Paul Tillich said about it. Both heaped ridicule on the Ritschlian School. Barth said the problem began with Schleiermacher, who betrayed the Reformation theology of salvation by grace through faith alone and scripture as the sole rule of faith, corrupting modern theology as a whole. Tillich said that liberal theology *was* the Ritschlian School, and Schleiermacher and Hegel were too great to be lumped with it.

In Britain, World War I was not a calamity for liberal theology, because Britons believed that Germany caused the war and they had nothing to disavow. Liberal theology in Britain carried on pretty much unchanged; it was rationalistic, philosophical, and very British. In the USA, three schools of thought dominated liberal theology for most of the twentieth century: evangelical liberalism, personal idealism, and naturalistic empiricism. Each had an institutional center, respectively at Union Theological Seminary, Boston University, and the University of Chicago, and all had connections to the Ritschlian School.

Evangelical liberalism was the heart and soul of American liberal theology, fusing Protestant evangelicalism and Enlightenment humanism. From its Enlightenment heritage it emphasized the authority of modern knowledge, affirmed the continuity between reason and revelation, championed the values of humanistic individualism and democracy, and kept metaphysical claims to a minimum. From its evangelical heritage it affirmed a personal transcendent God, the authority of Christian experience, the divinity of Christ's spiritual nature, the need of personal redemption, and the importance of Christian missions.

Every American liberal who attained public fame was an evangelical liberal: Rauschenbusch, Henry Ward Beecher, Adam Clayton Powell Sr., Harry Emerson Fosdick. To them, the whole point of liberal theology was to be modern and gospel-centered at the same time. This school preceded the Ritschlian School and later got ballast from it. William Adams Brown and Arthur C. McGiffert were

pure Harnack liberals who turned Union Theological Seminary into a bastion of Ritschlian theology. Philosophically they were post-Kantian idealists, but they quoted Schleiermacher and Herrmann about keeping philosophy in its place.

The second major school was emphatically post-Kantian. Borden Parker Bowne, the founder of American personal idealism, blended Kant and Rudolf Lotze with his own Methodist piety, contending that personal spirit is transcendently real and the basis of the organic unity of nature. In its second, third, and fourth generations this school appropriated Hegel, Troeltsch, and the social gospel. Bowne and Albert Knudson expounded a post-Kantian version of subjective idealism; Edgar Brightman and his many protégés were neo-Hegelian pantheists; Walter Muelder and Harold De Wolf developed a personalist social ethic and taught it to Martin Luther King Jr. This school was influential far beyond the academy, because King was in it, and because nearly all American liberals were personalists in a prosaic sense of the term.

For example, Fosdick was not a religious philosopher; he could not have taught a seminar on post-Kantian idealism. But his sermons conveyed a popular version of it to millions of people. Fosdick taught that the divine is present wherever goodness, beauty, truth, and love exist. Human beings are divine to the extent that they embody and mobilize these qualities. Jesus was uniquely divine because he embodied these qualities fully. Christianity is superior to other religions as the religion of personality. Divinity is the perfection of love that every person is capable of mobilizing, and religions are true to the extent they promote the flourishing of personality. Sin is whatever binds you to your selfishness and blocks your capacity to live into your higher self.

This is the version of liberal theology that still preaches in American liberal Protestant churches, subtracting the Christian superiority business. Meanwhile the Chicago School said that liberals had to stop claiming continuity with pre-modern traditions of Christian belief, because modernity is a revolution. Theology must stand or fall on modern knowledge and experience. Shailer Mathews, George Burman Foster, Gerald Birney Smith, and Edward Scribner Ames were the leading Chicago School theologians, espousing History of Religions historicism, pragmatism, radical empiricism, and religious naturalism.

Theology cannot be truly historicist if it privileges Christianity, so the Chicago theologians followed Troeltsch out of the Ritschlian School. Then they said that philosophically, even Troeltsch was stuck in the nineteenth century. The Chicago School followed William James and John Dewey in teaching that all knowledge is instrumental, concepts are habits of belief or rules of action, and ideas are true according to their practical usefulness. Ideas are like knives and forks. Life is a continuous flux or stream of experiences lacking distinct boundaries. Instead of focusing on atomistic units of experience, radical empiricism tracks the flowing, immediate continuity of experience. The Chicago School thus espoused a form of process theology long before this term existed.

For thirty years the Chicago theologians debated their religious naturalism. They conceived God as an expression of ideals and equivocated on God's cosmic reality, debating whether it was enough to describe God as an analogical expression for an idealized concept of the universe. In 1926 they heard that Alfred North Whitehead had published a book titled *Religion in the Making*. With excitement the Chicago theologians began reading it; with total bafflement they turned the pages. Whitehead called it a primer in religion, but they could not understand a single page. Ames dismissed the book as completely unintelligible. Smith said he felt some affinity with it, but could not say why. Mathews said it galled and embarrassed him to read page after page of familiar words without understanding a single sentence. Did anyone claim to understand this purported genius?

Yes, there was one American expert on Whitehead – Henry Nelson Wieman, who gave a brilliant lecture at Chicago on Whitehead's thought and was promptly appointed to the faculty. Wieman told the Chicago theologians that Whitehead's religious philosophy was perfectly intelligible and extremely important. It showed that the existence and nature of God are revealed in the inherent structure of physical nature. It proved that the universe exists only by virtue of its order, which is aesthetic, loving, and not accidental.

Wieman admired his new colleagues for pioneering an empirical, naturalistic, pragmatic approach to theology, and he supported their social gospel activism, but he could not fathom why they took so much interest in history, and he chided them for letting go of God's objective reality. History does not matter, because history does not prove anything. What matters is, What is it all about? In Wieman's view, liberal theology had become too sentimental; it shrank from defending God's existence; and it relied too much on the social gospel. That strategy was a loser; it drove the strong and intelligent people away from religion.

Wieman implored that theology had to become tough-minded again. Religion is pointless without God, but science negates traditional ways of conceiving God's existence. Wieman argued that whatever else the word "God" may mean, at bottom it designates the Something upon which human life and the flourishing of the good are dependent. It cannot be doubted that such a Something exists. If there is a human good, it must have a source. The fact that human life happens proves the reality of the Something of supreme value on which life depends. Wieman made that the object of theology. He conceived God as a structured event and theology as the analysis of the total event of religious experience.

Wieman's relationship to Whitehead was complex and conflicted, and he later broke away from Whitehead's metaphysical system, although not as much as he claimed. For nearly twenty years, the Chicago School was Whiteheadian in Wieman's fashion. Then in the 1940s it took a pure Whiteheadian turn, giving birth to process theology.

For the past fifty years, Whiteheadian process theology has been the dominant school of American liberal theology. It became a school in the 1940s while Rein-

hold Niebuhr said that liberal theology is stupid and naïve. Niebuhr is a topic unto himself, and I do not have time for him today. But the liberals that he attacked always protested that he specialized in ridiculing a stereotype. For them it was either liberal religion or no religion at all. They believed in the liberal faith of reasonableness, openness, modernity, and the social gospel. Virtually all of them conceded that Niebuhr scored against optimistic idealism, which seemed like sentimental mush to a generation that lived through two world wars and the Great Depression. But no version of neo-orthodoxy was an option for them. Only liberal theology faced up to modern criticism.

To the old liberals, the crucial thing was to follow Jesus and worship God as the divine Spirit of love without having to believe any particular thing on the basis of authority. Some alternative to orthodox over-belief and secular unbelief was still needed, even if liberalism needed better answers. In that mood they kept liberal theology alive and passed it to our time, just before the later Niebuhr confessed that of course he was a liberal theologian, what else could he be? He had never been anything else; it was only the idealistic versions that he hated.

In our time theology exploded into a vast array of new theologies, curtailing the tendency to identify oneself with only one kind. Fluid boundaries and hybrid identities became the norm. It started with liberation theology in the United States and Latin America, which led to feminist, womanist, postcolonial, postmodern, gay rights, Latinx, minjung, and transgender theologies. Liberation theology was and is an eruption of repressed voices. Liberal theology addressed the cultured despisers, responding to modern criticism and science. It had a social conscience, but spoke from a standpoint of cultural privilege. Liberals did not attack white supremacy – a structure of power based on privilege that presumes to define what is normal. Liberalism was about eliminating barriers to individual opportunity. Liberation theology privileged a different set of questions: How to be liberated from structures of violence and oppression that repress the personhood of millions?

From its beginning liberation theology sharply challenged the white Eurocentric basis of modern theology, which raised the question of how liberal theologians should relate to the many kinds of liberation and postcolonial theology. In my view, what matters is to engage the world from multiple perspectives, not to take sides between radical and liberal forms of liberation theologies. Liberal feminism is obviously compatible with liberal theology, but it is also possible to combine radical feminist ideology with liberal theology; Rosemary Ruether and Catherine Keller are prominent examples. The liberal agenda of addressing modern criticism cannot be wrong, but it cannot rest with doing so on liberal terms.

Today, individual construction is by far the dominant mode of liberal theology, and at Union Seminary, it is unthinkable to espouse a liberal theology that is not in conversation with various liberation theologies, postcolonial criticism, and interfaith theologies. Since Vatican II, Roman Catholics have produced some of

the most creative and sophisticated versions of liberal theology, notably Elizabeth Johnson, Roger Haight, and Paul Knitter. But there are no distinct Catholic schools of liberal theology. Today the only vital, organized liberal school in the USA is the school of Whitehead. It has a genius founder; a brilliant cofounder in Charles Hartshorne; a cast of theologians from the second and third generations of the Chicago School; and many contemporary proponents led by John Cobb, David Ray Griffin, and Catherine Keller.

Cobb and Griffin institutionalized process theology at Claremont School of Theology. Many feminist theologians belong to the process school, notably Keller, Marjorie Suchocki, Thandeka, Monica Coleman, and Rebecca Parker. There is an equally large ecological contingent led by Cobb and Jay McDaniel, a Catholic stream led by Joseph Bracken and Daniel Dombrowski, and a prolific group of Wieman-style naturalists led by Donald Crosby, Nancy Frankenberry, and Jerome Stone.

Any form of religious philosophy that conceptualizes becoming and event as fundamental categories of understanding is a type of process thought. Whitehead's version is pan-experiential, relational, and panentheist, contending that the irreducible constitution of the things constituting the universe *is* their experience as moments of feeling. Actual entities – the basic units of nature – are experiencing subjects that realize some value and pass out of existence in the process of being succeeded by similar occasions. Individuals do not have feelings; we become through feeling. The subject emerges by feeling its way into being. Events are not occurrences that happen to things or that things experience. Events are the fundamental things, the immanent movement of creativity itself. God is an order in the process of creativity. God's primordial nature is a unified, conceptual, actual entity that does not change; God's consequent nature is derivative and conscious, accumulating all self-actualizing choices; the two natures interact through the weaving of God's physical feelings in God's consequent nature upon the concepts of God's primordial nature.

I am not a Whiteheadian; I am a post-Hegelian liberationist liberal. Whitehead's account of the laws of process contradicts his problematic doctrine of God. He argued that actual occasions must perish before they can be prehended by subsequent occasions *and* that God is an actual entity whose being is always in process of becoming through God's consequent experience of the world. In other words, data are available only after the internal existence of an entity has vanished, and God never perishes. But if God never perishes, it is impossible on Whitehead's terms for God to provide data for other entities. And if God is an actual entity analogous to a momentary experience of an individual, God is a succession of deities.

Instead of uncoupling God from creativity in Whitehead's fashion, I believe it is better to construe creativity as constitutive in the power of being that is God's being. Then we are still talking about the Christian God, who is not subject to

passage. Hartshorne took one step in this direction by dropping the idea that God is an everlasting concrescence. He conceived God as a personal society of divine occasions, each of which unifies the present moment and is prehended by succeeding occasions. Since actual entities do not change (they merely become) and God changes by acquiring new prehensions, Hartshorne redefined Whitehead's God as a society of actualities: God is an ordered society of occasions of experience analogous to a human soul. Whiteheadians have long debated this alternative. Twenty years ago the Hartshorne group had the edge, but in recent years the pendulum has swung back to Whitehead's denial of transcendental unity. The process school is committed to Christian-Buddhist dialogue, Whitehead's idea of creativity closely resembles Buddhist Emptiness, Cobb has converted to the idea of plural ultimates, and Keller's denial of transcendental unity is central to her Whiteheadian theology.

I agree with Hartshorne on the importance of personality and unity, but even his version of Whiteheadian theism has no concept of divine transcendence over nonbeing or of divine self-relatedness, partly because he was excessively rationalistic. In Whiteheadian theory, there is more in becoming than in that which becomes, and in Hartshorne's revision, God is the inexhaustible society of events within becoming. Whiteheadian theory supports a notion of divine transcendence as inexhaustible excellence: God's relationship to the universe is like our transcendence of our immanent bodies through the power of self-consciousness. But what if there is more in that which becomes than in becoming? This "more" would have to come from participating in that which does not become; something that is there from the creation of all that is. In that case, transcendence could mean God's power over nonbeing, not only inexhaustibility. It could be the ultimate ground of all categories, not merely all that is excellent. Whitehead's God can only be nice, luring us to make good choices, but what sort of God is not ultimate and is not free to be terrible?

Whiteheadian theory assigns God's relations in dyadic fashion to terms outside God's self, either as external absoluteness or internal relativity. It has no concept of divine self-relatedness, apart from world-relatedness, and no basis for distinguishing between the operations of the divine Word and Spirit. To wring a doctrine of the Holy Spirit out of Whitehead, one has to construe the Spirit as particular providence for particular occasions: The Holy Spirit is God's love for the world. Whitehead and Hartshorne strongly affirmed the lure of love divine, but they did not call it the Holy Spirit because Whiteheadian theory is dyadic and they were rationalists. Whitehead's God is not moved by ideal subjectivity to enter the suffering and otherness of the world and return to God's self. Many theologians prefer Whitehead to Hegel on this point. I take the contrary view that liberal theology does not get stronger by eliding the Trinity.

Realistic theologies are keyed to what is said to be actual, reading knowledge of God and the aims of ethical action from the given. Idealistic theologies are keyed to

claims about truths transcending actuality. I am opposed to lifting realistic actuality above ideals and idealistic discontent, even as I acknowledge that idealism poses the greater danger. A wholly realistic theology would be a monstrosity, a sanctification of mediocrity, inertia, oppression, domination, exclusion, and moral indifference. Christianity is inherently idealistic in describing the being or movement of spirit as the ultimate reality and in holding to transcendent moral truths. But an idealistic theology lacking a sense of tragedy, real-world oppression and exclusion, and the danger of its own prideful intellectualism would be worse than the worst theological realism. The only kind of idealism that interests me is liberationist – privileging the critique of oppression, linking tragedy with the struggle for justice, expressing idealistic discontent, and admitting what it does not know.

All idealistic theologies feature the principle of identity and most feature the mystic emphasis on God's unknowable non-objectivity, insisting that all thinking about God is inadequate. Thus Eckhart spoke of God as no-thing, "God beyond God," and Tillich's idea of "the Unconditioned" was an echo of Eckhart, refusing to identify the divine mystery with anything finite and conditioned. I agree with Tillich and Niebuhr about what went wrong in liberal theology, while favoring Tillich's version of the argument. Liberal theology fatefully severed love from justice and power by reducing love to emotion. It banished ontology from theology and lived off culture religion, a mere husk. To restore the Trinitarian holism of love, power, and justice, some kind of onto-theology must be risked, conceiving love, power, and justice as integral moments of a whole. The power of being is its capacity to affirm itself against inner and external non-being. A self becomes powerful by absorbing non-being in self-affirming fashion. To conquer separation is to gain power, and love is the power that unites the separated. Love is the foundation of power, not its negation. Whatever makes reconciliation impossible is against love.

Nearly all of this can be dug out of Hegel, but the bad parts of Hegel are horrible, and even the good parts are notoriously obscure. I accept that Hegel can be interpreted as a pan-logical right-Hegelian, an anti-Christian left-Hegelian, a conceptual realist in the mode of Aristotle or Spinoza, a social philosopher and phenomenologist who only pretended to care about metaphysics, the founder of postmodern nihilism, or a philosopher of love who developed a radically hospitable and capacious theology. I am in the last camp, while defending Hegel very selectively. Hegel inflated normal Eurocentric conceit to something grotesque. He prattled about the superiority of his civilization and religion with racist asides and a shabby acceptance of colonialism. But Hegel also broke open the deadliest assumptions of Western thought, conceiving being as becoming, consciousness as the social-subjective relation of spirit to itself, negation as relentless, and God as spiraling, intersubjective Spirit – a spiral of concentric relations of Creator within Word within Spirit.

Many have contended that Hegel's God is a counterfeit self-doubling of the pantheist One, lacking any real relations to the world. William Desmond is the

leading contemporary exponent of this view that nothing is outside Hegel's God, so God's relations to the world are epiphenomenal to God's ideal self-relations. But Hegel said he believed that monism is wrong, pantheism is impossible, and the economic Trinity of God, world, and real relations is primary. In Hegel's logic, we are not left with a forced choice between identity and difference. Each of the three elements of universality, particularity, and individuality mediates the other two. Hegel gave difference its due by replacing abstract identity with recognition. Everything rational preserves identity and difference through mediation. The triad of logic-nature-spirit has no founding, single order, or absolute primacy. Each element assumes the middle position and is mediated by the others. Far from inflating Kant's transcendental ego, Hegel argued that ideality and reality interact, yielding Spirit. God is the inexhaustible creativity by which potential differences within divinity are released, creating a world, and by which the divine ideality actualizes itself.

The first Hegelian School emphasized Hegel's logical mill and the providential progress motif, playing down the tragic and heterodox aspects of his thought. It felt compelled to show that Hegel's religious philosophy was compatible with Christian orthodoxy. This compulsion heightened after left-Hegelians said the aim of Hegel's thought was to abolish Christianity. Theological interpreters of Hegel always have this over-determined legacy of system orthodoxy versus atheistic dismissal to overcome. In my American context, it takes a great deal of sorting out to recover the parts of Hegel that still matter for theology. Hegel developed the concept of the death of God as a theological concept – God realized as Spirit through the negation of the negative. He undercut the postmodern critique of Western metaphysics before it existed, conceiving a new category of thought – intersubjective Spirit, the dynamic whole of wholes that unifies thought and being in Spirit. Like Whitehead, Hegel expounded a process theodicy of God salvaging what can be salvaged from history. But Hegel's tragic sense of the carnage of history cut far deeper than Whitehead, lingering at Calvary.

The Whiteheadian School deserves immense credit for having the audacity to be a school and to keep one going. The Whiteheadian picture of the world giving rise to minds that apprehend the world suggests a deep kinship between mind and the world – one that deepens the idealistic emphasis on will, purpose, and feeling. Liberal theology has much at stake in how this argument turns out. But to me, this argument pales by comparison to the social gospel and liberationist question: How does this religious community aid the struggles of oppressed and excluded people?

I came through the door of social justice activism. I was a solidarity organizer long before I became a cleric at the age of 30 and an academic at the age of 35. I have continued in this work throughout my academic career, which spans exactly the period when trade unions were decimated and the political Left fell apart. Today my nation's president is a narcissistic white nationalist who admires

dictators and wants very much to be one. This did not happen overnight. It began with slave labor and the obliteration of Native Americans. It accelerated when the Civil War ended without ending. In 1964, racial backlash realigned America's two political parties. The USA has never built anything like a culture of atonement for its colossal crimes. Now comes the bitter harvest of this failure, amid a global upsurge of fear and resentment.

Anti-immigrant parties have taken power in Austria and Italy, Brexit resounded with anti-immigrant hostility, Germany's government is teetering over immigration and asylum, and Alternative for Germany has become its third largest party. In this situation, liberal theology has to be known for defending inclusion, hospitality, democracy, and social decency. We can debate about how mere decency became so embattled, but we cannot believe there is any alternative to defending it. Meanwhile, progressive theology must speak to postcolonial liberationists, post-Occupy occupiers, queer activists, feminists and environmentalists, post-everything seekers, and old-fashioned social justice organizers who still believe that a better world is possible amid the upsurge of fear and resentment.