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978-0-521-09360-6 - Theology and Contemporary Culture: Liberation, Postliberal
and Revisionary Perspectives

David G. Kamitsuka

Excerpt

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Introduction

It is my sense that I have not been alone these past several years in being deeply influenced by liberation, postliberal and revisionary movements yet puzzled also about how to bring together their best methodological and theological perspectives. These movements have drawn impressively from the powerful and forward-looking legacies of modern Christian theology. Who does not join liberation theologians in being moved by the prophetic foresight in Pope John XXIII's call for the church in the modern world to be a church of the poor? Who is unimpressed by Friedrich Schleiermacher's bold and subtle defense of religious piety in the face of religion's cultured despisers, which has inspired revisionary theology? Who does not find postliberal theology's indebtedness to Karl Barth justified in light of his masterful rendering of a strange new biblical world as a direct challenge to nationalism and other modern ills? Revisionary, postliberal and liberation theologies have been notable custodians of these modern theological legacies, precisely because of the creative ways in which they have transmuted them for the contemporary theological scene. Theology today would be well served in trying to incorporate strands of insight from these movements.

However, intermovement exchanges have not been particularly helpful to those interested in this pursuit, since theologians from these three movements have mostly squared off in ways that have produced more heat than light. For over a decade, the literature has bristled with often highly polemical comments by revisionary and postliberal theologians about each other's work. For philosophical and theological reasons, postliberals have heavily criticized revisionary strategies of making "religion experientially intelligible to the cultured and

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uncultured among both its despisers and its appreciators” by attempting to secure the validity of Christian faith with problematic appeals to foundational “universal principles or structures” of human experience.¹ Revisionary theologians, disturbed that postliberal theology seems “too willing to leave to *ad hoc* arrangements” the task of defending Christian claims,² have charged them with “abandoning . . . a public realm.”³ Latin American liberation theological writings have come under critical scrutiny as well. Postliberal and revisionary theologians, though appreciative of liberation theology’s ethical commitments, have leveled some strong criticisms. Postliberals typically identify liberation theology with a revisionary method which attempts to translate the Christian faith into extratextual or “nonbiblical idioms . . . deliberately and systematically” which they fear could jeopardize the “biblical formation of the *sensus fidelium*.”⁴ Some revisionary theologians have worried that liberation theology uses its “commitments to a particular cause [to] supply all the criteria (praxis criteria) necessary for truth in theology” without an adequate analysis of the “theory-laden” nature of that praxis.⁵ For their part, liberation theologians have posed direct and unavoidable challenges to many of the assumptions of those revisionary–postliberal theological debates and have criticized their North Atlantic counterparts for applying “the cosmetic vocabulary of ‘social concern’” to their theological proposals, “hoping to update a sluggish old inventory by slapping a new label on obsolete goods.”⁶ The overall impression given to most onlookers is that intractable differences have generated something of an intermovement impasse.

At one level these polemics are not only understandable but fitting. As Wesley Kort has recently observed, theologies are “bound to differ”

¹ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), p. 129.

² David Tracy, response to the review symposium on his *Plurality and Ambiguity* in *Theology Today* 44 (1987/88), p. 515.

³ David Tracy, “Theology, Critical Social Theory, and the Public Realm” in *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology*, ed. Don S. Browning and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 21.

⁴ George A. Lindbeck, “Scripture, Consensus, and Community,” *This World: A Journal of Religion and Public Life* 23 (1988), p. 14.

⁵ David Tracy, “The Foundations of Practical Theology” in *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church and World*, ed. Don S. Browning (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 61.

⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Liberation Praxis and Christian Faith” in his *The Power of the Poor in History*, tr. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983), p. 64.

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and with productive results.⁷ At the risk of sacrificing nuance regarding all that is involved in the production of discourse, one might say that part of what causes a theological movement to coalesce is that theologians begin to pursue their work with the commitment to common focal values – that is, certain interests, concerns and emphases – which distinguish their approach to theology from other theologies. It is not a mischaracterization to say that revisionary theology, shaped by modernity’s “turn to the subject,” has confronted secularity in terms of the overarching framework of the person as *homo religiosus*. Revisionary theology’s pursuit of its rightful place in the public intellectual realm by means of strategies such as mutually critical correlations between interpretations of religion and culture is driven by the focal value of promoting theology as fully critical reflection on Christian witness. Postliberal theology has emphasized the importance of an intratextual use of scripture in rendering a story which shapes Christian communal identity and has the assimilative power to absorb the world. Its focal value has been to promote the redescriptive function of theology in relation to the distinctive internal logic of Christian beliefs and practices. Liberation theology is marked by a turn not to the subject but to the subjugated. Liberation theology resists any theological strategy (correlationist or intratextually redescriptive) which might deflect from the demands of the material and spiritual needs of the oppressed. Its mode of critical reflection is concretely informed by the focal value of solidarity with the oppressed who struggle to articulate their hope in the midst of the denial of their personhood.

Given the deeply rooted differences among their paradigm-shaping theological focal values, why not let these movements go their own way, plowing their own deep furrows in roughly parallel lines? Our times require something more. The breadth of the challenges and uncertainties reflected in contemporary culture and Christian communities is simply too complex to be adequately addressed from only a single perspective. One of the ramifications of the impact of contemporary cultural plurality is that theologians, alongside other theoreticians, now face the erosion, if not deconstruction, of the categories and

⁷ See Wesley A. Kort, *Bound to Differ: The Dynamics of Theological Discourses* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

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norms for theoretical practice which once constituted the universe of modern scholarship. I do not want to exaggerate the situation, but formerly reassuring beliefs about a general foundation for knowledge, the perspicuity of texts, the objectivity of ivory-tower intellectuals, the inevitability of social progress, and other icons of modernity can no longer be held with the equanimity which marks the writings of even our recent theological predecessors. More disturbing still is the unprecedented worldwide suffering to which theology must also respond. Our hopes for a “global village” are chastened by the urgent voices of the truly deserted in our world who hunger for economic and political betterment beyond the oases of the North Atlantic middle class or even the pockets of privilege scattered throughout the world. The demands for intelligibility in the public realm, remembering the suffering of the victims of oppression, remaining open to plurality within the church, and the biblical imagination necessary to form Christian communities responsive to these challenges are simply too great for us to continue with our isolated enclaves of theological business as usual. More productive mutually critical conversation is needed if theology is going to speak cogently and relevantly to the intellectual, pastoral and socio-political challenges Christian communities face today.

This book pursues the contention that to begin to meet the challenges of contemporary culture, working proposals are needed which encompass all of these movements’ values: normative redescription of Christian communal beliefs, fully critical theological reflection, and solidarity with the oppressed. Theology must continue to serve its redescriptive function in relation to Christian communal forms of life. It must continue to develop as a fully critical discourse on Christian witness, taking its proper place in the public intellectual realm. It must continue to insist on the ethical mandate for solidarity with the oppressed who are marginalized from dominant culture. Without these values, theology becomes either an antiquated practice of an intellectual elite, unable to convey the existential and social power of the Christian story to the world; or so absorbed in the thick description of Christian beliefs and practices that it loses all sense of accountability to critical public dialogue; or ill-equipped vigilantly to assess ideological bias in the discourse and praxis of dominant and marginalized Christian communities. While there are other crucial values for theo-

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logical practice today, I believe any theology would do well to draw from all three of these in order to respond to the breadth of our evolving ecclesial, intellectual and political scene.

Given intermovement conflicts and criticisms, my efforts to make best use of liberation, postliberal and revisionary insights emerge in the process of recasting past misfiring conversations, clarifying differences, and pursuing common ground. These proposals and recastings of conversations are not attempts irenically to mask conflicting, at times even incommensurable, viewpoints. I merely want to propose some possibilities for promising intermovement conversation by drawing together insights from these movements in ways which may not be immediately apparent. Thus far, I have spoken of conversations among theological movements, but movements are not in conversation, theologians are. I propose, therefore, to engage the work of some key figures within these movements, in particular: revisionists Schubert Ogden and David Tracy; postliberals George Lindbeck and the late Hans Frei; and Latin American liberationists Clodovis Boff and Gustavo Gutiérrez. This strategy of addressing particular theological positions admittedly fails to do justice to the rich diversity which has emerged from within these movements, but it has the advantage of being able to correct specific misleading claims. Hence I need to make it clear that when I speak of postliberal, liberation or revisionary theology, I am making my case in light of the theologians whom I name. These theologians have been particularly influential, but I do not mean to give the impression that they represent all other theologians who associate themselves with any of these movements.⁸

Indeed, regarding revisionists, one of the arguments I will make is that there appears to be a growing divergence between some of the views of Ogden and Tracy – a divergence which coincides, not accidentally, with new areas of mutual interest among Tracy and postliberal and liberation theologians. Postliberals have tended to gather rather closely around the fire of Lindbeck's programmatic text, *The Nature of Doctrine*, but I do not mean to imply that there are no differences or changes in thought within this movement. For example,

⁸ For excellent introductory overviews of each of these three movements, see James J. Buckley, "Revisionists and Liberals"; Rebecca S. Chopp, "Latin American Liberation Theology"; and William C. Placher, "Postliberal Theology" in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David F. Ford, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, Mass. and Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

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on issues of biblical hermeneutics, postliberals have engaged in self-critique of the postliberal platform, so to speak, which has spurred reevaluation on the issue of characterizing scripture literarily as narrative. Latin American liberation theologians, although sharing common religious and political commitments, do not make up a unified methodological approach except in the most general of senses. I have chosen to focus on Gutiérrez not only because he is one of the originators and most influential articulator of Latin American liberation theology, but also because Gutiérrez's theology is the subject matter of brief but important critical pieces by Ogden and postliberals Stanley Hauerwas and George Hunsinger.⁹ My reason for choosing Boff from among the other Latin American liberation theologians, who are perhaps currently better known in North Atlantic theological circles, is that his *Theology and Praxis* has appropriately been described as "the best systematic discussion of methodological questions related to a theology of politics" which has yet emerged from Latin America.¹⁰

Exchange of ideas between Tracy and postliberals has been quite regular in the last decade; nevertheless, first impressions have been hard to change, necessitating a reevaluation of where Tracy and postliberals currently stand.¹¹ Though they have disagreed in the past, I see potential for fruitful ongoing conversation on issues as vital as apologetics and hermeneutics. There has been little actual interchange between Ogden and postliberals. Ogden has only engaged one postliberal theologian in any extended way – in his highly critical review of

⁹ Schubert M. Ogden, "The Concept of a Theology of Liberation: Must Christian Theology Today Be So Conceived?" in his *On Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), pp. 134–50. Stanley Hauerwas, "Some Theological Reflections on Gutierrez's Use of 'Liberation' as a Theological Concept," *Modern Theology* 3 (1986), pp. 67–76. George Hunsinger, "Karl Barth and Liberation Theology," *Journal of Religion* 63 (1983), pp. 247–63.

¹⁰ José Míguez Bonino, *Toward a Christian Political Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), p. 120 n. 3. Clodovis Boff, O.S.M., *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations*, tr. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987).

¹¹ See e.g., David Tracy, "Lindbeck's New Program for Theology: A Reflection," *Thomist* 49 (1985), pp. 460–72; "On Reading the Scriptures Theologically" in *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck*, ed. Bruce D. Marshall (University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), pp. 35–68. Hans Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?" in *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 47–61. William C. Placher, "Revisionist and Postliberal Theologies and the Public Character of Theology," *Thomist* 49 (1985), pp. 392–416; *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), esp. pp. 155–60.

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Frei's posthumously published *Types of Christian Theology*.¹² Likewise, postliberal theological treatments of Ogden are few and brief and nothing in-depth exists, to my knowledge, on his most recent work.¹³ I intend to bring the views of Ogden and postliberals into proximity with each other in an effort to see where long-standing disagreements still hold or can give way to at least some degree of complementarity. Ogden and Tracy have addressed the work of Gutiérrez and/or Boff;¹⁴ postliberal theologians, with the exception of Hauerwas and Hunsinger, have mentioned Gutiérrez or Boff only very briefly.¹⁵ Notwithstanding this sparse postliberal–liberation theological interaction, I will argue at various points in this study that underexplored common ground exists between postliberal and liberation theologies on methodological and constructive theological topics.

The following three questions loosely forecast the scope of my proposals and investigations into intermovement conversation: How should one's conception of theology configure the three focal values discussed above? How should the theologian instantiate those values methodologically when defending Christian claims or using scripture theologically? How should one assess theological differences? The chapters I outline below offer responses to these questions. Chapter one serves as a general introduction to how these three movements clash or share similarities and sets the stage for the proposals which follow in subsequent chapters. This first attempt to recast conversations among

¹² Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992). Ogden's review appears in *Modern Theology* 9 (1993), pp. 211–14. See also Ogden's brief comment on Lindbeck in Schubert M. Ogden, "Karl Rahner: Theologian of Open Catholicism," *Christian Advocate* (Sept. 7, 1967), p. 11.

¹³ For some of these treatments, see Hans W. Frei, "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection," *Christian Scholar* 49 (1966), pp. 303–306 and *Types*, pp. 63–64. David H. Kelsey, "Method, Theological" in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), pp. 364, 365, 367. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, pp. 159, 171 n. 26. Ronald F. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), pp. 5–6; *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), pp. 91, 144–47, 151–53.

¹⁴ See n. 9 above; see also Schubert M. Ogden, *Faith and Freedom: Toward a Theology of Liberation*, rev. edn. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), p. 77; *Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many?* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1992), pp. 89–91. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), esp. pp. 390–91; "God of History, God of Psychology" in his *On Naming the Present: God, Hermeneutics, and Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis; London: SCM, 1994), pp. 50–53.

¹⁵ See Kelsey, "Method, Theological," p. 364; Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), p. 119 n. 31.

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theologians from these three movements investigates the issue of how values inform the conceptions of theology of Frei, Gutiérrez and Ogden. I argue specifically that Ogden's criticisms of how Frei and Gutiérrez conceive of theology is a factor of disagreement over the configurations of focal and unfocused values informing their conceptions. That is, what Ogden considers focal (fulfilling the task of fully critical reflection by maintaining theology's independence from the Christian witness) is also a value – albeit an unfocused and underdeveloped one – in Frei's and Gutiérrez's conceptions of theology. Correlatively, Ogden underappreciates how what is focally valued by Frei (theology's task of normative redescription of the Christian form of life) and Gutiérrez (theology's solidarity with the oppressed) throws a critical light on his own conception of theology. This chapter intends to clarify that while real differences exist between their configurations of focal and unfocused values, nevertheless, it is possible for all three theologians to agree in a formal way that any theology should nurture all three values. Having established this minimal ground of formal agreement, I can then move on in subsequent chapters to propose how these focal values should be instantiated methodologically. This will entail investigating the differences that arise within and between theological movements when it comes to making actual choices about specific aspects of theological practice.

Chapter two begins a two-part investigation (continued in chapter three) of what constitutes a viable approach to defending the validity of Christian claims in light of the so-called linguistic-historical turn. This issue has spawned often highly polemical debates between revisionists and postliberals, making it necessary to sift through the overstatements and understatements both groups have made about the other's views on apologetics. Chapter two highlights revisionary apologetic methods, examining how Ogden and Tracy similarly endorse fundamental theology's task of defending the theoretical credibility of Christian faith but have increasingly diverged on how to secure that credibility – due in part to the fact that each reads the demands of the current intellectual situation differently. I argue that when trying to defend the reality of God, Ogden both understates the problematic nature of his appeals to common human experience and reason and overstates the force of what his theistic arguments can establish. The effectiveness of his apologetic arguments will be tested

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in hypothetical exchanges with contemporary secular theorists Richard Bernstein and Richard Rorty. Tracy has significantly evolved in his stance on apologetics (originally it was quite close to Ogden's). We will trace the twists and linguistic-historical turns of his moves toward a more postmodernly sensitive, nonfoundational apologetic approach. Two elements I believe a nonfoundationalist apologetics would need are a coherentist approach to the justification of belief and a consensus approach to pluralistic public debate. Chapter three lays out a proposal for just such an apologetics.

My proposal in chapter three for a nonfoundationalist apologetic method borrows a conceptuality from recent moral philosophy called "wide reflective equilibrium," a process of bringing beliefs, principles and background theories into a coherent whole. I present this method within the polemical context of arguing that postliberals, long accused of being confessionalists, and liberationists, long accused of discarding theoretical credibility concerns for praxiological ones, do or could endorse something like this approach. From this perspective, and somewhat ironically, they are as prepared to converse in the pluralistic public realm as their revisionary colleagues. This chapter attempts to demonstrate how using a wide reflective equilibrium approach allows the theologian to defend the presuppositions as well as the constitutive claims of Christian belief via coherentist arguments during indirect and direct apologetic exchanges with proponents of competing reflective equilibria. Using critical background theories, wide reflective equilibrium tests not only the theoretical but also the practical validity of Christian claims, making it an approach that is highly compatible with liberationists' insistence on the indispensable role of the social sciences in theological practice. By promoting multifaceted, publicly intelligible argumentative strategies which move from debate to overlapping consensus with non-Christian interlocutors, wide reflective equilibrium apologetics could be seen as a method of choice for any of these theological movements.

Chapter four investigates an issue all three movements consider integral to doing Christian theology: reading the Bible theologically as the church's book – that is, as scripture in light of tradition. This entails the daunting task of adjudicating among a plurality of intracommunal and intercommunal reading practices as well as confronting the

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poststructuralist attack on logocentric, closed canons. My proposed approach to a scripture–tradition relationship draws from three impulses at work in revisionary, postliberal and liberationist hermeneutics: continuity, to combat textual deconstruction and communal fragmentation; plurality, to foster openness to otherness especially at the church’s margins; and critique, to offset interpretive bias and textual distortions. I propose how these three hermeneutical impulses might be implemented in an approach which synthesizes methodological elements from all three movements: the functional plain sense, rule theory of doctrine, a dialectical approach to doctrinal reformulation, and critical exegetical and hermeneutical tools of analysis. I envision a hermeneutical approach where the interpretive framework is relatively stable and flexible; scripture is used normatively yet read critically; and reading practices remain dialectically open to new, especially marginalized perspectives.

Chapter five is a forward-looking thought project on an issue raised in the previous chapter: the use of rule theory for identifying intercommunal continuity among differing plain senses of scripture. In this chapter, I test that proposal specifically with a postliberal–liberationist debate initiated by Hauerwas and Hunsinger regarding the theological implications of Gutiérrez’s use of the concept of liberation. I will try to demonstrate the fruitfulness of using rule theory for distinguishing between their theological “vocabularies,” which differ according to context and audience, and their regulative doctrines – an exercise intended to show the kind of grammatical compatibilities and complementary differences which postliberals have previously overlooked in relation to liberation theology. This analysis is also intended to contribute to challenging a fairly widespread North Atlantic opinion that liberation theologians (and Gutiérrez, in particular) tend to conflate liberation and salvation.

Chapter six takes stock of several issues running throughout the previous chapters regarding how a theologian can effectively instantiate the three focal values analyzed in chapter one in light of practical judgments about ecclesial well being. One issue has to do with how the theologian relates the scriptural world and host culture. Another issue has to do with the kinds of obligations the theologian should fulfill when arguing for doctrinal innovation or preservation, given the diversity of Christian communities. A third has to do with how the theologian