

The Making of Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900–1950

Gary Dorrien

Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 2003 (666 pages)

Monumental, encyclopedic, breathtaking—these are words that come to mind for starters when considering Gary Dorrien’s achievement in his three-volume history of liberal Protestant theology in the United States. In fact, that anyone else would try to write almost two thousand pages of small type about theology (whether liberal or conservative) is hard to imagine—not because Dorrien is naïve but because few historians exhibit his energy and resourcefulness. And this brings to mind another word that is applicable to Dorrien’s project: “ironic.”

For the last half-century, religious historians, previously confined to seminaries and divinity schools where the training of pastors was the first order of business, have been doing their best to produce scholarship acceptable to university departments of religion or history where research and graduate students occupy a high priority. During that time, religious historians, accordingly, moved away from the study of churches and denominations, an area of inquiry that plausibly involved theology, to examine the influence of religion on culture and society. Hence, they effected the change from church history to religious history.

What is more, Dorrien’s study of liberal Protestant theology has little support in the United States from the field of historical theology, an area of study that examines formal theological reflection in a fashion similar to that of intellectual history. Although European universities sustain any number of important chairs of historical theology, the best that universities in the United States can do is to field the hodge-podge of appointments that comprise a religion department. For scope, subject matter, and method, Dorrien’s series stands out like an odd thumb; it is such a welcome addition to the field that the word *sore* hardly applies.

The volume under review is the middle one of the series. In the first, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805–1900* (2001), Dorrien traces the emergence of a liberal theology from Unitarians such as William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker to doctrinal looseness among such New England Congregationalists as Horace Bushnell and Henry Ward Beecher. In this second volume, *Idealism, Realism, and Modernity*, Dorrien carries the narrative into the twentieth century and through the era of so-called *neo-orthodox* theology, which, the author thinks, is better termed *neo-liberal* (more below).

A list of those figures treated in this book, though tedious because so many are obscure even to ministers and members of the mainline churches, shows just how comprehensive and ambitious Dorrien’s project is: William Adams Brown, William Newton Clarke, Henry Churchill King, Charles Clayton Morrison, Walter Rauschenbusch, Vida Scudder, George Burman Foster, Shailer Mathews, Shirley Jackson Case, Edward Scribner Ames, Douglas Clyde Macintosh, Gerald Birney Smith, Henry Nelson Wieman,

Francis J. McConnell, Edgar S. Brightman, Albert C. Knudson, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Rufus Jones, Georgia Harkness, Benjamin E. Mays, Reinhold Niebuhr, John C. Bennett, Paul Tillich, H. Richard Niebuhr, Henry P. Van Dusen, Robert L. Calhoun, and Howard Thurman. For each of these figures, Dorrien has read the bulk of their writing and assessed their backgrounds and influence.

This is no encyclopedia, however. The author groups these figures according to themes while also tracing lines of historical development. As such, this book is much more than considering one liberal theologian after another. It is a study of a broader theological tradition, and Dorrien uses his individual subjects to tell its history. Even so, this series will be a necessary research tool for anyone contemplating a course, article, or book on liberal theology. It is truly unsurpassed in its breadth and care.

To speak of liberal theology as a tradition may be a misnomer, since despite the variety of views represented among these thinkers—everything from pacifism to Kantian epistemology—what holds the group together is liberalism’s “essential idea,” which holds that “all claims to truth, in theology as in other disciplines, must be made on the basis of reason and experience, not by appeal to external authority.” This resistance to authority, what may in effect be the working out of American political ideals on theological reflection, is crucial for Dorrien’s classification of liberalism, for he also supplies a helpful orientation to the various schools of liberalism: the social gospel, empiricism, naturalism, personalism, popularizers like Fosdick, and neo-liberalism.

In the latter camp, Dorrien places the Niebuhrs, Tillich, and Bennet who usually receive the neo-orthodox label. But this switch of appellation highlights Dorrien’s effort to discover liberalism’s core conviction. As he explains, “In their positions on authority, method, and various doctrines, and in the spirit of their thinking, Niebuhr, Bennett and Tillich belonged to the liberal tradition, even as they insisted that liberal theology was wrong to sacralize idealism, wrong to regard reason as inherently redemptive, and wrong to suppose that good religion must extinguish its mythical impulses.” (Space constraints prevent discussing other helpful points of clarification that Dorrien makes regarding liberalism’s modernist and evangelical impulses.)

One of the reasons for typically placing the Niebuhrs and Tillich outside the fold is that they could describe liberal theology in terms like the following, from H. Richard Niebuhr’s *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937): “A God without wrath brought me without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”

Dorrien also registers criticisms against liberal theology but, in the main, defends it, for instance, by suggesting that Niebuhr’s eloquent quip was a “polemical exaggeration.” What Niebuhr may not have been exaggerating, however, was how scant theology was among the liberal theologians. Here, one of the faults of Dorrien’s book—he is following on the heels of his subjects—is that for all of the attention to a definition of “liberal,” he expends no such energy defining the word modified by the adjective. Yet, looking through the index and seeing that more entries exist for religious experience than for Jesus Christ raises a question as to whether liberal theology was actually

theology in any historic sense of the term. To be sure, as Dorrien shows, it sprang often from devout motives and at times scaled philosophical peaks, but liberalism rarely generated much copy on the basic doctrines of God, man, revelation, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the church.

To refuse to bend the knee to external religious authority is one thing (and it is plausible to wonder if such refusal is the most Christian of actions), but to call an intellectual enterprise “theology” even though it fails to follow in the well-worn trails of Christian dogma is akin to asserting that any academic exercise that involves religious questions is theology. Had the liberal theologians whom Dorrien here so competently and thoroughly analyzes relied more upon those older Christian categories of systematic reflection, their intellectual output might have spoken to issues and believers beyond their own time. As it turned out, the effort to recast Christianity in modern vernacular wound up being dated.

Dorrien deserves credit for trying to rescue liberal theology from obscurity. Readers will have to decide whether the attempt was worth the author’s Herculean efforts.

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The Gospel and Wealth: New Exegetical Perspectives

Angelo Tosato

Dario Antiseri, Francesco D’Agostino,

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Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2002 (611 pages)

This is an important collection of essays, or rather short, synthetic monographs, by a talented, Italian Catholic, biblical scholar, Angelo Tosato. (Some of his previous studies were published in the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*). The author had planned a study on “The Gospel and Freedom” but was unable to complete it before his untimely death in 1999. Messrs. Antiseri, D’Agostino, and Petroni have made a careful selection some of his extant, pertinent essays, which form a surprisingly coherent whole, albeit with some repetitions.

That the relationship between gospel and wealth is one of *prima facie* opposition should be the starting point of any serious discussion, Tosato claims: “One may come across important books (such as *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* by Michael Novak) or long, magisterial documents (such as *Centesimus Annus*) devoted precisely to this subject, and specifically aiming at throwing a bridge between the two, only to find that not a word is spent on this basic problem.”

This opposition is but an aspect of a more general one: “The Gospel proposes a religious liberation, to be achieved in a religious way. This way is different from and seemingly incompatible with the liberation proposed by liberalism. On those who want to maintain the compatibility between the two lies the burden of facing the intimations to the contrary that seem to issue from the Christian canonical sources.” As do most