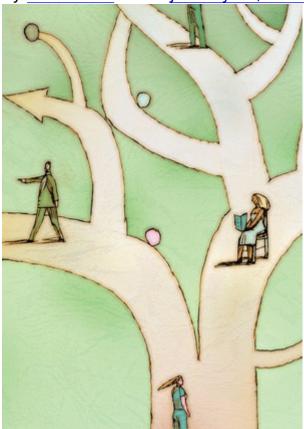# Another enlightenment

by Peter Ochs in the January 25, 2011 issue

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It is by living and dying that one becomes a theologian, Martin Luther said. With that comment in mind, we have resumed a Century series published at intervals since 1939 and asked theologians to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, questions and hopes as people of faith and to consider how their work and life have been intertwined. This article is the tenth in the series.

This essay might be titled "From another Reformation to another Enlightenment." Or perhaps "How an elder thinker returns to the instincts of youth." I have often detected the latter pattern in the works of other thinkers and have grown old enough to test this theory from within. Indeed, for the past two years or so I have begun remembering youthful dreams.

I recall entering college ready to embark upon the rationalist program of the Enlightenment: to become familiar with Descartes, Hegel and, above all, Kant, as if they were long-awaited prophets. The appeal to my young mind was the Enlightenment combination of earnestness, desire for rational clarity and coherence, and hope that all the world could be conceived and lived as a universal symphony and, at least on some level, in potential agreement.

But my youthful hope was short-lived. I recall distinctly one night of intense disappointment when, after a summer-long study of Kant, it first dawned on me that this exhilarating universal vision was limned by the circularity of ego-centered self-reference. I don't mean personal ego (what Kant called the empirical ego) but the form of ego itself (what he called the transcendental ego)—a measure of all things that adopted the law of simple identity as its own measure, I = I. It was an immense disappointment, shaking what a young person thought was "all of being" to its depths. Are we forever locked in the circle of our own humanity? Is there no escape? Is there no true contact with the world, with others, with the real?

At the time I thought I was simply asking questions that all humans ask. It was only later that I saw my youthful inquiry as part of a historically specific tendency, characterized as "Enlightenment universalism" and displaying these beliefs: that rationality is identified with conceptual clarity; that the clarity of an individual universe "in here" (within the mind) corresponds to the rationality that inhabits and gives demonstrable order to the world "out there"; and that it is good for all of us to seek this clarity—this light—because it will be the means of our repairing what is broken in this world.

That is what Enlightenment meant to me in my youth, so you see why it is shattering to lose trust in it. Once one has left the garden of reason, where does one turn for guidance in healing all this brokenness? What is the appropriate direction and discipline for reason?

The beginning of life after youth came a few weeks later, in a flash, like a shower of light. It came after youthful months of reasoning, but it was not itself a reasoning. Rather, it was something like a passage in and through light. That's about it. My mind was changed not by itself but by some sort of shipwreck and some sort of participation in another economy of desire and hope and work.

I left one home—secular youth and love of cogitation—and entered a rabbinical seminary to acquire my grandparents' "home" of Torah. This meant coming home to Torah by way of *dikduk* (grammar), *shoreshim* (root words), *parshiyot* (weekly readings), *sefarim* (books), *peshat* and *derash* (plain and interpretative sense), Mishnah, Talmud, *halakhah* (religious "law," but a better translation is "pathways of action"), *tsibbur* (community), *tefillah* (prayer for which there are many words) and on and on. These pathways of work ended in *shabbat,* another garden, another childhood.

Paul Ricoeur calls it "second naïveté"—a helpful notion, except that I prefer a word other than naïveté. When it comes a second time around, it doesn't feel very naive. If I were a Pentecostal I might use the phrase "second baptism" to describe it, but since there is work before the water, I'd settle for Mishnah Torah, "a second instruction that is also a second Word."

Some of us use the term *postliberal* to refer to this stage of thinking that comes after postmodern criticism—if one believes there is something that comes after. If there is, it cannot be a willful return to another modern dream of the universal and true; nor can it be an effort to romanticize a premodern tradition as if that tradition spoke directly to all human ears. These would be efforts to ignore postmodern criticism altogether by dressing up the ego in the clothing of some religious tradition and community or of some science of the universal. Postliberalism refers, instead, to an effort to discipline the *ego cogito* (the "I think") by reminding the ego that it did not give birth to itself and is not complete and true in itself. It was born out of others. If it desires clarity and truth, it will therefore need to investigate from where it received this desire, and the conditions for fulfilling it will lie in its source, not in itself.

Other postmodernisms also say this much. They may identify the source of this desire with a will to power or they may historicize it as part of some societal performance enacted at some time and place in response to some need or crisis.

Postliberalism takes another step, however. Its corrective genealogy traces the modern desire for light back to its Hellenistic roots—the consequence of a confluence of biblical and Hellenic desires. The biblical desire to serve the infinite will of God—the one creator of this world, the one revealer of ultimate wisdom and the one redeemer of all humanity—is combined with the Hellenic desire to bring clarity to the language we speak and thereby disclose the cosmic truths to which it

refers. When joined together, these two desires breed Enlightenment: the inspiring yet dangerous and misleading superdesire for humanity to reason its way to uncover the language of all languages and the speculative grammar of all grammars, and to heal humanity of its failings and sufferings.

At that point in the genealogy, postliberalism turns from historical reconstruction to action: disclaiming this super-desire and in its place reaffirming the two separate and context-specific desires that preceded it. We may, postliberalism says, work to clarify our regional languages (and this includes modern languages as well as the scriptural languages Hebrew, Arabic and Greek). And we must resume our service to God. But we must also renounce any effort to regard any regional language as if it were universal or confuse our human desires with God's. If we seek the universal, we recognize that it comes to us only through service to God, and God speaks to us only through finite languages and finite practices of knowledge and good works.

Nothing in this postliberal plan of action contradicts the postmodern critique of modernity. But by affirming traditions of action that preceded the *ego cogito,* this plan resituates reasoners within projects of service that postmodernists may, but need not, accept. Many do not.

And so I submitted the *ego cogito* to retraditioning. I found it hard work until I found I was not alone. After ten years of oscillating on the margins of academic philosophy and academic rabbinic studies, I found three companions (Robert Gibbs, Steven Kepnes and Laurie Zoloth), then nine more and, after another year or two, 40 to 50 more—all fellow travelers in postmodern or postliberal Jewish inquiry. These philosophers, Talmudists, literary scholars and historians joined in the dual service to God's word and to finite disciplines of reasoning.

We began to meet twice a year or more to engage in what we called textual reasoning: a practice of pouring together over rabbinic texts and rabbinic readings of scripture (*midrash*) until, around the table, over hours or days, the chains of discussions and arguments and discoveries about these texts and their interrelations and meanings seemed to take on directions of their own.

I am not referring to agreements among us (there weren't too many of those) but something like a style of intellectual (or cognitive and spiritual) dance, a rhythm we could not name but could recognize when we experienced it again. The rhythm included tropes and interpretive tendencies from each text we studied, aspects of

each of our personalities as thinkers and readers, and some marks of the different scholarly tools we employed. But the rhythm belonged to none of these. It displayed the patterns of rabbinic reasoning from those texts and among those scholars on those days of study. Afterward, we each might write about these texts and reasonings in our different ways, but we became through the process (and for a time) a kind of community of inquiry and of mutual care. That community—or those sets of relations to texts and to each other—was the author of our textual reasoning; no ego or set of egos was the source of its unity.

Somewhere early in the life of what we called our Society for Textual Reasoning we discovered that Jews were not the only thinkers who engaged in a project of postliberal studies. Some Christians and Muslims did the same. They formed not only circles of traditional scriptural study but also circles of textual reasoners who knew the Enlightenment model of reasoning, knew the antimodern religious alternatives— and sought another way. While they might at times explore similar models of reasoning, they gathered around different canons of scripture and different traditions, or at times subtraditions, of interpretation.

We also observed that students of the different Abrahamic traditions often found it helpful to discuss with one another what they experienced in their study circles. Some spoke of comparable experiences of that "rhythm" of interpretive reasoning we saw in Jewish textual reasoning.

As David Ford mentions in his "How my mind has changed" essay (*Century,* November 30), he, the late Daniel Hardy and I began to meet regularly to discuss these experiences. By dint of personality as well as tradition, we shared different but complementary approaches to the discussion. I recall, for example, that David drew our attention to the activity of the Spirit in these circles, to the poetics of our text studies and to the broader theopolitical implications of such work in both the denominations and the academy. Daniel drew our attention to the energies of divine attraction, to the ecclesial and eucharistic implications of "drawing around God's word" and to the implications of scripture study for both theological and scientific reasoning. I argued that my Anglican friends offered a pneumatological approach to scriptural theology that complemented the christological approach of the American postliberals I had befriended earlier (George Lindbeck, Hans Frei, Stanley Hauerwas and the students of these scholars). The three of us began to look over each other's shoulders as we studied scripture, and gradually we had began to practice the "study across borders" we later called scriptural reasoning.

We invited others from the UK and North America to join us in exploring this practice. By 1994, we had formed the Society of Scriptural Reasoning (SSR). During this period the Sunni scholar Basit Koshul became one of my Ph.D. students at Drew University and introduced me to a circle of what we later called Qur'anic textual reasoners. Soon several Methodist Ph.D. students (among them William Elkins and the late Roger Badham) joined Basit and me in a form of Abrahamic scriptural reasoning. In 1996, Basit brought a circle of Muslim scholars to help us make the SSR an inter-Abrahamic community of inquiry.

The members of the SSR realized how unusual it was for people to examine three different scriptural canons together and offer comments directly on one another's canons. This was not so unusual in a strictly academic setting in which each canon is examined at arm's length through text-historical and comparative studies. But the SSR invited all modes of inquiry, including commentaries emerging out of ancient traditions of religious practice. We did not worship together, but we brought our individually traditioned hearts to the table—hearts in dialogue with our academic minds, if you will.

In the process, we appeared to generate a third something: on one hand, a kind of believing practice, but a practice a step cooler than the practices of intradenominational textual reasoning; on the other hand, a kind of critical academic practice, but one open to the voices of our various traditions. We studied only within small circles that met for hours and days at a time and remained together for many years. We consciously nurtured friendships as an integral part of the study—friendships with one another and, metaphorically, among the various religious beliefs and practices.

Now my mind is changing once again. The first major change was that dramatic turn in my youth when, in a flash, my disillusionment with Enlightenment was met by the light of another way of knowing. This second change appears undramatic. It involves the gradual sense that, for me at least, the fruit of an adult lifetime of postliberal inquiry may be "another Enlightenment." I begin to sense that, when practiced in a disciplined way as an occasional complement to tradition-specific textual reasoning, Abrahamic scriptural reasoning may answer the desire I once had for Enlightenment: the desire for that "clear and universal" reasoning that would be a light of truth and a salve to all of humanity's wounds.

For over 40 years I thought that this desire had been sweetened into love of God and Torah and disciplined into the work of service. But, returning in older age to the instincts of youth, I now entertain the thought that the desire was never lessened and the *ego cogito* never exiled. I begin to weigh a different story: in a flash, this desire may catch a glimpse of the light at its source and of its source. The glimpse may suggest that, like this photon stream in relation to that sun, this desire belongs to nothing other than God's desire and that, like this reflection of sunlight off that mirror, the "I think" serves as a potential vehicle of God's desire.

In this story, the *ego cogito* plays a rather humble role, but its desire for clarity and universal truth is no longer simply errant. It may be, within its finite location, a desire for the light and trustworthiness (troth) of God's word, by which word the whole universe is created. It may, in other words, be a desire that this finite light of reason, with its limited clarity and scope and reliability, serve as agent only of God's light and of care for God's creation. In its youth, this desire may simply have mistaken the reflected and refracted light of reason for God's light and mistaken the immediacy of reason's apparent vision for the long time it takes (a lifetime's "week" of work) to trace mirrored light back to its most proximate sources.

Textual reasoning traces one path through which the "I think" redirects itself toward its proximate sources: the finite location—of language and literature, community and service—in which God's word is received and through which our desires may serve God's. Textual reasoning is performed by way of a network of relations (social, hermeneutical and more) that provides a place of both love and discipline for the "I think." Each individual text-reading around the table shares, more or less, in the form of the "I think": the fruit of someone's judgment, at this moment, that the text displays a particular meaning. The individual is heard, but each individual must also hear the other person, and as a source of new models of judgment and not merely of new ways of testing one's own model.

The movement of textual reasoning from one reading to the next is therefore irreducible to the form of the "I think." The group's overall reasoning is not formless, but its form is enacted through its movement, and its movement passes from the fruit of one "I think" to another and another.

The form, in other words, is not of "I think" but of "we think," or (in one case) "the people Israel thinks," or "Torah is thought." This is the form we call textual reasoning. It displays itself only locally, through a given event of movement over the

texts and among a given community. In this sense, textual reasoning cannot be mistaken for one instance of "universal reason"; we cannot infer from a given event of textual reasoning exactly how another event will appear, let alone how human beings do or ought to reason. At the same time, textual reasoners may receive the texts they study as displays of the Creator's word addressed—in this instance—to the people Israel. If so, textual reasoners would receive these texts as spoken by the one who also speaks to and through all creation and all humanity; this speech would therefore be a sign of God's care and instruction for all humanity, but not explicitly and not by way of any clear, distinct and universal propositions.

Textual reasoning is a postliberal rather than strictly postmodern practice, because its critique of Enlightenment models of rationality is not a critique of Enlightenment desire for a reasoning that would instruct and mend all humanity. That desire remains, but its fulfillment is projected onto the end of days and onto a Word that speaks nonclearly or locally.

But what of scriptural reasoning? It is both like and unlike textual reasoning. It offers a play of possible readings voiced around the table, but the voices emanate from one of three different locations of language and tradition. In this sense, three text traditions seem to sit at the table, but the voices heard belong only to individuals, who speak only of scriptural texts, read apart from their commentarial traditions. A unique stream of reasoning appears gradually around the table, and once again it is irreducible to the form of "I think." But it is also irreducible to the form of "we think." Like the "I think" in textual reasoning, each traditioned "we think" is given voice but no privilege. It is invited to the feast as one guest among others. Finding no reason to resist the stream, it joins its voice to the others, but it does not know where it is being carried.

If scriptural reasoning were recommended as more than an occasional exercise, this last sentence might give me pause: too many reminders here of the Enlightenment's flight beyond language use and tradition—and I do not want to return to the childhood garden. In the words of a friend active in scriptural reasoning, Micheal O'Siadhail:

> An apple-bite and that garden vanishes
> forever. You too will roam with Adam.
> Sap in the trees' limbs still lavishes
> memories. You grow to another millennium.

> Is what we love what we find?
> Is there somewhere a second garden,
> an arbour where the quickened mind
> soars between its knowing and abandon?
> (from *The Chosen Garden*)

My change of mind is toward another enlightenment—not the one that imagined its universe within the form of "I think" and regarded untraditioned reasoning as a universal standard for everyday action in the world. In the words of Aref Nayed of Dubai, our scriptural reasoning gatherings may be brief, but the effects of scriptural reasoning are "carried in the heart." We return home to traditioned communities of belief and action. "The Lord works in the in-between (*barzakh*) that is 'triangulated' among the traditions that contribute to SR. This is a universalism beyond the universe and a disclosure from-above-disclosures."

The "we" of our gathering is not that of any new language community or some extralinguistic replacement. It is the we of eschatological hope, whose not-yet is not a flight from the traditioned communities but a transforming warmth that works among them through the spirit within.

Scriptural reasoning refers its vision of universal care and truth to the end of days. It offers no immediate solution to inter-Abrahamic, let alone interhuman, conflict. At the same time, it can bring the peace of the end time to one hour or three days of intimate conversation among traditional Muslims, Jews and Christians. This practice may potentially spread to others, one table and one conversation at a time, in unpredictable ways. And in Nayed's words, the "peace of one hour or three days may enter the heart permanently."