

Just what is 'postliberal' theology?

by [James Gustafson](#) in the [March 24, 1999](#) issue

Reading a recent issue of the *Christian Century* finally provoked me to register a concern raised by other reviews and articles over many months. It would help me a great deal if the editors and writers would delineate, if not define, the "liberal" we are "post" (see especially "The making of a postliberal," by Anthony Robinson and Martin Copenhaver, October 14, 1998). On the basis of my reading I gather that the word "liberal" has now come to stand for whatever it is that various current authors wish to define themselves against. In midcentury "liberal theology" was what "neo-orthodoxy," as it was called then, was against. Now, some authors who were earlier classed as "neo-orthodox" are sometimes cited as "liberal Protestants."

Some placement of the position claimed by postliberals would help clarify things. Since postliberal theology seems most interested in defining itself against what one could call its left flank, it might be useful to learn whether it has a right flank against which it would also like to defend and define itself. How "orthodox" does postliberal theology want to be? How biblicistic does it want to be? Is postliberal theology the same as (another big term) Protestant evangelical theology? If it is not, how does it differ?

But, for the moment at least, postliberals are more concerned with the place they claim to have abandoned than they are with the place they may be headed. Unfortunately, concern does not always translate into clarity, and the impressions that postliberals convey about what they have left behind are frequently less than satisfying. So what are the "liberal" forms of Christianity that now are "post"? Is there any consensus about the answer to this question among those who apply the label "postliberal" to others or use it to classify themselves? Who are the "liberal" theologians that now reside on the wrong side of the "post," and why are they called "liberal" rather than something else?

In my retirement I have been rereading a lot of Ernst Troeltsch, partly to commemorate my first study of his work under James Luther Adams 50 years ago. In my reflections about his and others' works, it seems to me there are three questions

that "postliberal" theologians and pastors need to answer clearly.

The big one is also Troeltsch's main concern: Christianity's relations to particular historical and cultural contexts at the time of its origins and in the course of its development through the centuries. It is very easy in the "postmodern" (another loose term) period we are passing through to accept a radical historical relativism that qualifies all claims to truth. Indeed, historical relativism can be invoked as a solution to Christianity's truth claims rather than being seen, as was the case for Troeltsch and some of us, as a major challenge to them. But if a philosophical justification is made for "postliberal" Christianity on the ground of historical relativism, are its proponents ready to accept the implications of that paradoxically universal claim—that is, that there are no ways to grade the better or worse, if not the truth or falsity, of historically relative claims? That there are no ways to judge that one version of "postliberal" theology is better than another version?

Pastors and theologians might find the radical historical particularity of their current religious interests to be satisfying and even marketable. They and others want a particular identity defining the church or Christian beliefs over against whatever they choose to call the other—in the past it used to be called the "world." Certainly concern for the particular identity of Christianity was one of the poles that Troeltsch and those of us influenced by him have to be concerned about. But why is Christianity's particularity a concern? For sociological and/or psychological reasons? Or are "postliberal" theologians ready to make a stronger historical claim, for example, that God chose to reveal Godself in a unique and exclusive way in a single historical event, Jesus Christ? If they do not make that claim, they can be called "liberal" theologians in the eyes of most "orthodoxies." If they do make that claim, they are "orthodox" and should say so forthrightly. In my opinion Barth was straightforward: it was clear that he was claiming the universal significance of a unique particular historical event because God chose to be revealed in it.

The second question simply follows from the first: What are the implications of "postliberal" views of Christianity for the unavoidable consciousness of radical religious pluralism, not to mention the plurality of various functional equivalents to religions? Karl Rahner's idea of "anonymous Christians" was one answer to that question, backed by a complex philosophical and Christian theology. And if "postliberal" Christians accept Rahner's main point about religious pluralism, even if they reject his terms and theological defense of it, can they still be so comfortable about their satisfaction with Christian particularity? If they do not accept something

like Rahner's view, do they not have to proclaim the "superiority" of Christianity in relation to Judaism, Islam and other non-Christian religions? Troeltsch attempted such a claim-in ways that I strongly reject. If "postliberals" do not want to make that claim, they are certainly "liberal" in the eyes of many orthodoxies.

The third question is about how "postliberal" Christians relate the very reliable findings of various modern sciences to their theologies or religious practices and convictions. There are many dimensions to this question, and I can only be illustrative.

Since first reading George Lindbeck's *The Nature of the Doctrine*, which has become a defining work for many who call themselves "postliberal," I have been struck by the penultimate sentence in which he commends "the ancient practice of absorbing the universe into the biblical world." I will remark on only two implications of this statement. One is practical. While it would take an empirical study to solve the issue, my hypothesis is that most Christians in our culture-orthodox, liberal, postliberal or what have you-interpret their experiences and "the universe" primarily in terms that are neither biblical nor theological. Various nonreligious interpretations of anxiety inform the lives of many people. Similarly, many people turn to a variety of nonbiblical interpretations to understand experiences of natural and moral evils.

In light of these interpretations, the practical theology of "postliberal" Christianity has to do one of two things: either a) show the falsity or at least inadequacy of nonbiblical explanations and interpretations of events or b) become explicit about the relationships between the biblical theological interpretations of the events to those which are not explicitly biblical. My hypothesis is that very few "postliberal" pastors, theologians or laypeople use biblical symbols, analogies, metaphors or explanations as their first order of discourse in dealing with life in society, history or nature. If these persons concur in this hypothesis, a daunting pastoral and theological task has to be faced: How does one relate a political interpretation of an event to a biblical interpretation of the same event? Remember, the goal is to absorb the universe-including the world in which we live our daily lives-into the biblical world.

The other implication is more ideational, although it also carries practical implications. Troeltsch was occupied, as I and others have been, with the question of whether God as "person" can be affirmed in the face of various modern scientific accounts of realities and Reality. Of course, this is not only a modern question; it has

a long history in various cultures. One could plausibly argue that God as person or as agent is explicable in Feuerbachian terms-an interpretation of the human is projected onto the Deity. But if "postliberal" Christians want to center their piety and interpretation of life on an agential, personal, interpretation of God, they must (to return to previous themes) defend the unique particularity, adequacy and universality of biblical "revelation."

Practical implications, of course, attend such a defense of biblical revelation. For many of those who adhere to such a view of what the Bible reveals-especially the revelation of the Deity as a loving person-particular interventions by God into events, from hurricanes to headaches, are warranted expectations of answers to prayers. Now, if "postliberal" Christians wish to qualify some of the reasonable inferences that can be drawn from very traditional views of divine personhood and activity, they are probably liberal in the eyes of many orthodoxies. If they do not wish to make such qualifications, can they claim to be differentiated from the virtually magical expectations of divine interventions that one hears proclaimed by television evangelists and in "joys and concerns" expressed in Sunday services? If they do claim such a differentiation, on what grounds?

The wider issue is the scope of the context within which Christian life and thought are to be seen, interpreted and understood. Again, Troeltsch's concerns were on the mark. He was concerned with how Christianity would cope with "modernity," which meant coping with historical relativism, religious pluralism and the sciences. Whatever "postliberal" Christianity is, it has to face the realities not only of "modernity" but also of "postmodernity," and it needs to define itself against a right flank as well as a left.

"Postliberal" Christian thought and religious life might be simply an avoidance of the questions, not answers to them, that a Troeltschian "liberal" Christianity asked. But then, how does its agenda differ from very traditional, very orthodox or Protestant evangelical views of the Christian faith? Those questions are still with us. If one wants only to avoid them, and not answer them, please-editors and authors in the *Christian Century*-be straightforward about that.