

# Liberal types

by [Ronald H. Stone](#) in the [October 18, 2003](#) issue

*The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity 1900-1950.* By Gary Dorrien. Westminster John Knox, 666 pp., \$39.95.

Theological liberalism stands between American secularism and various forms of Christian orthodoxy. Regarding scripture and church tradition as sources for theology rather than as representations of external authority, it uses reason and experience to reformulate Christian theology. Gary Dorrien, professor of religion at Kalamazoo College, has produced a history of liberal American theology that is a necessary addition to every theological library. Doctoral students in theology and ethics need to read this masterful survey. Dorrien combines his great skills in historical narrative with excellent analytic work to produce this book aimed at the advanced theologian. His judgments, from a Niebuhrian-Tillichian perspective, are accurate and fair.

Dorrien searches for precise labels to classify the two score of thinkers he analyzes. While arguing that liberal theology evolved from both Enlightenment and traditional Christian heritages, he regards the division of the movement into "evangelical" and "modernist" camps as overly simple. All of the liberals wanted to modernize Christian theology, but many of those regarded as modernists were also Christ-centered. He states that "most American liberal theologians have been 'evangelical' and 'modernist' to some degree."

While using his categories modestly and admitting that some figures bridge or blurr categories, he divides the theologians into mystical liberals, evangelical liberals, naturalistic-empiricist liberals and personalist liberals. Most, but not all, of his liberal thinkers are associated with the University of Chicago Divinity School, Union Theological Seminary or Boston University School of Theology. Pictures of 23 of his chosen figures (including two women and one African-American) enliven the book; Reinhold Niebuhr's picture, taken from his war department identification card, provides a bit of humor. Photos of the three divinity schools are also included: Union, representing the evangelical liberal camp; Chicago, the naturalistic-empiricist liberal

camp; and Boston, the personalist liberal camp.

Dorrien's earlier book *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion 1805-1900* emphasizes liberalism's emergence in the pastorate, while the current volume focuses on the faculty at these three schools. Most of the leading seminaries and divinity schools of mainline Protestantism came under liberal dominance in the first half of the 20th century, replacing the church-related colleges as leaders of church thought. Because Dorrien has covered the social ethics of this period in his excellent text *Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity*, ethicists receive only minor consideration here unless their work also had a major theological impact. The book says little about institutional church life. But the seminaries serve the churches, and this reader would have preferred more pages on the institutional struggles which rendered all mainline denominational offices relatively liberal.

Dorrien understands why neoliberal is a better characterization than neo-orthodox for Reinhold Niebuhr, John Bennett and Paul Tillich. I appreciate his sensitivity to the intellectual closeness of Niebuhr and Tillich. Langdon Gilkey and Elizabeth Sifton (Niebuhr's daughter) also have noted that similarity. To emphasize Niebuhr's and Tillich's distinctiveness, I like the terms pragmatic-liberal for Niebuhr and perhaps ontological-liberal for Tillich. Bennett, of course, is grouped with Niebuhr. Niebuhr was responsible for bringing both of these men to Union, and he specifically requested Bennett to emphasize the role of the church in his teaching. Bennett obliged, complementing Niebuhr's work.

Dorrien's accomplishment in this second volume of his trilogy on liberal theology makes one eagerly await the final volume. The conclusion of the second telegraphs that the third will take up Martin Luther King Jr. as an African-American liberal.