

A review of Liberalism Without Illusions

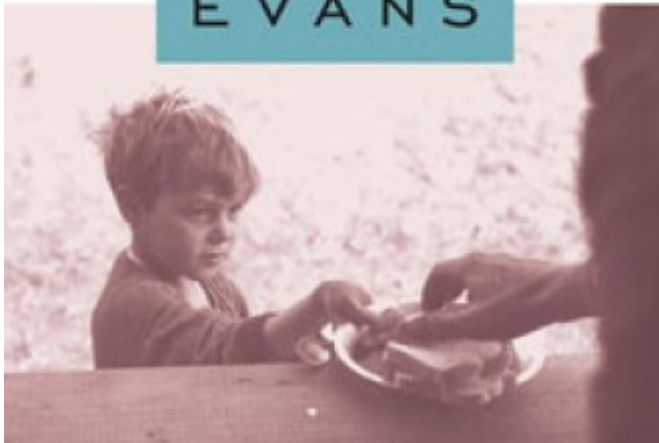
reviewed by [Randall Balmer](#) in the [November 16, 2010](#) issue

In Review

LIBERALISM WITHOUT ILLUSIONS

Renewing an American Christian Tradition

CHRISTOPHER H.
EVANS



Liberalism Without Illusions

By Christopher H. Evans
Baylor University Press

While I was writing this review, I came across a statement from the managing editor of *Christianity Today*, who wrote that his magazine offers "independent journalism about an important niche of American Christianity." He went on to say, "We are the 'new mainline,' a principal voice of Protestant Christianity in America."

I doubt that Christopher Evans would disagree. Contemplating the 21st century, he concludes in *Liberalism Without Illusions* that "the future of American liberal Christianity is one characterized by a posture of exile, where we no longer can expect that the larger culture cares what we are saying or doing." It wasn't always thus, of course, and part of the appeal of this superb book is the author's careful attention to the past.

Evans opens with a definition:

Theological liberalism is a historical movement that supports critical engagement with both Christian traditions and contemporary intellectual resources. As opposed to more traditional forms of Christian theology, liberalism has been characterized by an affirmation of personal and collective experience, systemic social analysis, and open theological inquiry.

That clear statement might in itself be worth the price of the book, for one of the weaknesses of theological liberalism in recent years has been its lack of definition. Is liberalism the Social Gospel? Is it liberation theology in one of its many guises? Is it synonymous with political liberalism? Is it even discernibly Christian any longer?

Evans argues that liberalism is indeed Christian and that it derives from a long and noble tradition of cultural engagement. In the United States, liberalism emerged out of "the matrix of one of the most orthodox theological traditions in America: New England Calvinism." Evans traces the intellectual genealogy from people like William Ellery Channing, Horace Bushnell and Walter Rauschenbusch to Howard Thurman, Rosemary Ruether and James Cone. (Oddly, Charles Chauncy, Jonathan Edwards's antagonist during the Great Awakening and arguably the progenitor of American liberalism, doesn't figure into Evans's narrative.)

The zenith of liberalism in America, of course, was the Social Gospel movement, which emerged in the decades surrounding the turn of the 20th century and was resuscitated by Martin Luther King Jr. during the civil rights movement. In both instances, theological liberals were able to act on their conviction that God is directly

involved in the events of human history and that Christians must, as Evans writes, "work for the creation of a just world through the achievement of *systemic* socio-political change."

Those high-water marks for liberalism, however, bracketed World War I, the horrors of which prompted a reconsideration of liberalism's affirmation of essential human goodness. After what was known as the Great War (before it occurred to anyone to assign wars numbers), Reinhold Niebuhr and H. Richard provided—depending on your perspective—either a mild corrective to or a devastating critique of liberalism's naïveté, especially on the central doctrine of human ability.

What happened to theological liberalism? Before reading this book, I would have said (and, in fact, did say!) that a pessimistic view of human nature more nearly fit the Zeitgeist of the 20th century, which was arguably the genocidal century: the massacre of Armenians, the Holocaust, the Khmer Rouge, Bosnia, Rwanda and so on. Another factor was the growing distrust of institutions, beginning in the 1960s, principally of the government but also of religious institutions.

Liberals had become complacent and self-satisfied with their cultural influence by the 1950s, but the popular identification of liberal theology with mainline Protestantism, which by all indices has suffered a decline since the mid-1960s, did little to credit liberalism in the eyes of many Americans.

When you sprinkle in the aforementioned lack of definition and the steady drumbeat of ridicule for all things "liberal" from the "downstream media" (Limbaugh, Beck, Hannity and others), it's no surprise that theological liberalism does not exert the cultural influence it once did. (Evans himself, a professor at Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, occasionally heads for the redoubt of "progressive" rather than "liberal.")

I'm not persuaded that these explanations are wrong, but Evans offers another, very compelling reason for the decline of liberal theology: elitism. Since the demise of liberal preacher-theologians like Phillips Brooks, Henry Ward Beecher and Harry Emerson Fosdick, theological liberalism has increasingly been an academic pursuit rather than a homiletical trope. Early in the book, Evans cites a recent Baylor University survey in which 26.1 percent of respondents identified themselves as "mainline Christians," while only 13.8 percent described themselves as "theologically liberal." Put another way, liberals have no analogue to the evangelical

dispensationalist film *A Thief in the Night*—which features my late father (preacher Clarence Balmer) and which Evans cites as an example of evangelicalism's ability to speak the cultural idiom.

"If considering American religious history solely as intellectual ideas, one could make a strong argument for the triumph of liberalism," the author writes. "However, if one wrote a history of Christianity purely from the standpoint of popular religious movements, then it would be difficult to include liberalism as a central narrative." Evans does not think that the salvation of liberalism lies in the work of liberals like Marcus Borg or John Shelby Spong, who are more easily identified "by what they don't believe about the Christian tradition, as opposed to what they do believe." Rather, Evans believes that "liberalism worked best when it proclaimed a message of deep Christian commitment while seeking to enable persons to relate their faith to the social, religious, and cultural contours of a given era."

Liberalism Without Illusions offers a vision of liberal theology that is unmistakably Christian, a characteristic even more essential in a multicultural context. It calls on the best of liberalism's heritage, including the impulse "to question its inherited traditions" and "to engage the ambiguities surrounding human moral behavior." But Evans counsels against delusions of grandeur: "The ultimate illusion that Christian liberalism must abandon is one predicated on winning the church (and the world) back to its point of view, especially the yearning to recapture the perceived glory of a Christendom world."

There, on the margins, lies faithfulness and fidelity to the gospel, as liberals should have learned from bitter experience over the past half-century. Let evangelicals and the editor of *Christianity Today* worry about church-growth schemes and "impacting" the world. The "new mainline"? They can have it.