

Liberal heroes

By [William C. Placher](#) in the [May 1, 2007](#) issue

In Review



The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, and Postmodernity, 1950-2005

Gary Dorrien

Westminster John Knox

This book completes a magnificent scholarly accomplishment: the three-volume *The Making of American Liberal Theology* series (the two previous volumes were *Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900* [2001] and *Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900-1950* [2003]). Gary Dorrien, recently named the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Seminary in New York, has given us clear, fair accounts of all the important, and most of the semi-important, writers within the tradition he is examining, drawing on published works, reviews, unpublished correspondence, manuscripts and interviews. He seems to have read everything. That over 1,700 pages of such careful analysis have been published within only a six-year period is astonishing.

This volume's part of the story begins in the early 1950s with two schools of metaphysical theology: the last days of Boston personalism and the heyday of Chicago process theology. It moves on to forms of liberation theology that are sympathetic to liberal theology (not all of them are!), the beginnings of liberal Catholic theology in America, process theology at Claremont, and more recent developments at Chicago, Vanderbilt, Harvard and elsewhere. Dorrien defines *liberal theology* as "the idea of a Christian perspective based on reason and experience, not external authority." Liberal theologians think of themselves as having moved out of the constricting limits of what one of them, Edward Farley, calls "the house of authority" and as having taken on the Enlightenment's goal of daring to think for oneself. Dorrien cheats a little, I think, at the edges of that definition, which accurately describes, for example, Henry Nelson Wieman and Gordon Kaufman but seems a bit too simple for Langdon Gilkey, David Tracy and Rosemary Radford Ruether, all of whose work seems a mixture of liberalism and elements of other traditions, like neo-orthodoxy.

Dorrien's version of the story, moreover, focuses more on the doctrine of God and theology's relation to metaphysics than on Christology and theology's relation to biblical scholarship. Marcus Borg gets a few pages at the very end of this volume as a "popularizer" of liberal theology, but otherwise Dorrien understands his project as a history of theology, not of biblical scholarship. Fair enough. But my guess would be that debates about biblical interpretation have played a larger role in defining theological liberalism than have metaphysical arguments about whether or not we can believe in a personal God. Dorrien gave more attention to questions of scripture in earlier volumes; perhaps the change merely represents the increasing compartmentalization of scholarly endeavors.

Dorrien is also better on the trees than on the forest. If you want to know what X said, who X's teachers were, or how X's mind changed, no one could give you better answers than Gary Dorrien. What larger cultural trends in the background were shaping all that? Here he is less helpful. But the least fair critique of a book is to imagine another sort of book the author might have written. Dorrien gives us wonderful accounts of dozens of theologians and their interconnections; anyone wanting to write a more interpretive history will have to start with what Dorrien has to tell us.

The larger questions that this final volume raises have to do with liberal theology itself. As he comes up to the current era, Dorrien remains an enthusiast, though he recognizes that liberal theology according to his definition might seem to have gone out of fashion. Except for the process theology tradition at Claremont, liberalism's great schools of thought have fragmented.

Some scholars who might have been liberal theologians a couple of generations ago have abandoned theology altogether for other subdisciplines under the umbrella of religious studies. And the pure liberals' debates with their academic colleagues slightly to the right seem parochial quarrels in the face of the massive impact of conservative evangelical Christianity in America.

Still, Dorrien insists, "American liberal theology, locked in crisis since the 1930s and taken for dead even by its friends since the 1960s, produced some of its richest and most sophisticated work in the generation following its purported demise." Gilkey, Kaufman, Tracy, John Cobb, Deotis Roberts, Sallie McFague, Ian Barbour, Elizabeth Johnson and others all stand in the liberal tradition, and all are doing important theological work. It has been, Dorrien asserts, an "unnoticed renaissance."

No argument from me about the importance of such work. But that list would be more persuasive as evidence of liberal theology's health if so many of those on it were not near or past retirement. Moreover, the fact that there is a lot of good theology doesn't add up to the existence of a healthy movement, and there do seem to be symptoms of ill health.

Dorrien's first volume looked at 19th-century theologians who shaped the life of churches. Channing, Emerson, Bushnell and Henry Ward Beecher made a difference in American religious life. One can make that case in our time for liberation theology, particularly its feminist branches. But liberal theology in other forms seems to

inhabit a narrow academic world these days.

From 1965 onward, Dorrien asserts, Whiteheadian process theology has been the only vital school of American liberal theology, standing above all other approaches. To be sure, Alfred North Whitehead was a very great philosopher. It may be that philosophy and intellectual life more generally ought to have been profoundly shaped by his thought. But in general they haven't been. Alas, nowadays philosophy is often less at the intellectual center of things than are cultural studies and literary criticism. Among philosophers metaphysics is out of fashion, and among surviving metaphysicians Whitehead rarely gets much attention. Hence process theologians are in the awkward position of urging their fellow theologians to get out of our ecclesial ghetto and talk to the rest of the academy and the rest of the world, while relying on a philosophical approach in which academy and world seem to have little interest. In terms of having wide cultural impact, it looks like American liberal theology bet on the wrong horse.

Dorrien accurately presents the complex relations between liberal and liberation theologies, but I wish he had stepped back and reflected on them a bit more. Liberation theologians have generally criticized their predecessors for taking middle-class white male experience and pretending that it applied to everybody. Liberation theologians write from their own perspectives and thereby remind us that *everyone* writes from a particular perspective, though it is easier for those in dominant positions to ignore their own particularity.

With that difference, though, many liberationist theologians continue the projects of liberal theology. Many strands of thought influenced Martin Luther King Jr., but one of them was the Boston personalism of his graduate school teachers. Sallie McFague is a feminist, but her theological work grows out of many of the same sources as Gordon Kaufman's. And so on.

But there are other strains of liberation theology. James Cone, who wrote his dissertation on Karl Barth, appeals powerfully to the Bible for what it teaches us about oppression, liberation, and a God who is on the side of the oppressed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza makes the case for more powerful roles for women in the church by finding them present in the earliest Christian communities. Dorrien recognizes that such appeals to tradition and authority stand outside liberal theology as he has defined it, and therefore he leaves these theologians out of his account. But I would guess that they are some of the most influential liberation theologians.

“Theological revolts, fads, and correctives came and went,” Dorrien concludes, “but liberalism endured as a revisable tradition to be reclaimed after the season of ‘neo-orthodoxy,’ ‘death of God,’ ‘postliberalism,’ ‘radical orthodoxy,’ and the like had passed.” Well, maybe. I find writers in some of those schools to be more interesting than liberal theologians, and the nonliberal parts of liberationist theology to be its most interesting strands—richer in their interpretations of the Christian tradition, but also more connected to the intellectual world of postmodernism. The theologians in this book whom I find most appealing—from Gilkey, Tracy, Ruether and King to Kathryn Tanner and Philip Clayton—are also those whose classification as liberals is most ambiguous.

Even more, I worry about how any sort of theology at all, or at least any theology beyond the simplest-minded fundamentalism, can become an important force in American Christian life. That is the issue—not debates between liberals and those a bit to the left or right of them—that all theologians ought to worry about most today. I am glad that the Christian Century, once primarily the voice of liberals in Dorrien’s sense, has reached out to include many of us whose work Dorrien would count among the revolts, fads and correctives. Still, as all of us try to sort out what liberal theology can bring to the table in these wider conversations, we will have no better resources to review than Gary Dorrien’s remarkable three volumes.