Truth claims: The future of postliberal theology

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Postliberal theology has affirmed the decisive significance and the integrity of the biblical narrative. But in what way do postliberals affirm the truth of Christianity? Are they merely saying that the Bible is true in the way that a work of fiction is true? Is it sufficient for the church to claim that biblical truth lies in the capacity of the scriptural text to draw readers into a new framework of meaning that makes sense of one's life and world?

Much of the literature generated by and about postliberal theology has debated these questions. Meanwhile, the postliberal school founded in the 1970s by Hans Frei and George Lindbeck has entered its second generation and is showing signs of producing a variety of offshoots. As a school the postliberal project has been shorter on movement-consciousness than many previous schools of its kind, such as Boston personalism or the biblical theology movement. More important, the family resemblances among the different kinds of postliberal theology are getting thinner as the protegés of Frei and Lindbeck rethink what it means to say that Christianity is true.

One option for postliberal thinkers is to adhere to the idioms, or at least the general approach, of Frei and Lindbeck. This option describes a range of thinkers, including Garrett Green (Connecticut College), Stanley Hauerwas (Duke Divinity School) and William Placher (Wabash College). In this approach, the postliberal answer to the truth question is that scripture is true in the manner of its distinctively mixed genre and that, yes, it is enough to say that biblical truth is the capacity of the text to draw readers into a Christian framework of meaning. Philosophically, this stream of postliberal thinking draws chiefly on the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose writing on "language games" emphasizes that meaning arises as a function of learning the internal coherence of a language.

A second strand of postliberal theologians seek to recover a premodern understanding of truth in order to secure the claims of Christian faith. One of the chief proponents of this view is Bruce D. Marshall (St. Olaf College), who in several essays and in his recent book *Trinity and Truth* maintains that theology must return to the rich trinitarian theism of Thomas Aquinas to get its bearings. However, informed by contemporary nonessentialist analytical philosophy, Marshall argues that even Aquinas was wrong in trying to Christianize epistemological realism.

A third trend in the postliberal school takes a very different tack, arguing that postliberal theology as a whole is overly preoccupied with epistemological debates and is too much focused on conserving tradition. Those who press these concerns, such as Kathryn Tanner (University of Chicago Divinity School) and Serene Jones (Yale Divinity School), work with a postmodern understanding of culture and a strong commitment to feminism. They are, in effect, rethinking the relation of postliberal theology to liberal theology—in what way does it go beyond or counter classic liberalism?

These distinctions are not rigid; the movement remains very fluid. In recent discussions with Green, Hauerwas, Placher, Tanner and Marshall, I focused on these questions: Is postliberal theology distinguished fundamentally by its position on the nature of religious truth? Is postliberalism indeed a distinct alternative to theological liberalism and conservatism?

The truth question looms large in postliberal theology, and especially among the critics, who maintain that postliberal theology is deficient as a way of rendering Christian truth claims. Theologians pressing this criticism include Ian Barbour, Donald Bloesch, Brevard C. Childs, Gary Comstock, Alister McGrath, C. John Sommerville and Mark Wallace.

The attention to this issue bothers some in the postliberal school. “I think the epistemological realism-antirealism debate is overblown in its theological importance, and I try not to engage it,” Tanner remarks. Hauerwas also dissents from the idea that “we need an epistemological theory about realism and antirealism.” On the strength of Wittgenstein’s analysis of language and Alasdair MacIntyre’s analysis of language and social science, Hauerwas is predisposed “to leave behind epistemology.” But if he had to choose between philosophical realism—the belief that the objects of our thinking correspond to real entities—and antirealism, then “I’m clearly a realist,” Hauerwas says.

Green says epistemological questions can't be avoided, but he has his own particular way of addressing them. Instead of investing theological significance in a theory about how the mind intuits objects of sense data, or about the reality of the world external to consciousness, or about the extent to which the mind is creative in producing experience, Green focuses on the role of imagination, a term which refers in ordinary conversation to fantasy and illusion, but which also refers to discovery, illumination and reality. Green argues that the truth question is unavoidable for theology precisely because God encounters us in the imagination.

Green's version of postliberal theorizing on knowledge is compatible with the "cautious realism" that Placher also upholds. Placher cites Frei's Barthian-like emphasis on the factual historicity that the gospel narrative contains, and, with Lindbeck, Placher argues that the relativity of our understanding does not negate or preclude the reality of that which we seek to understand. In *The Nature of Doctrine*, Lindbeck accepts Aquinas's assertion that while we cannot begin to imagine what it means to say it, we must affirm that God is really good. Placher explains: "The significatum of our claims about God [in this case, that God is indeed good] corresponds to what is the case about God, but the modus significandi [any understanding we may have about what this claim means] doesn't."

Placher's book *The Domestication of Transcendence* elaborates this argument with the implicit purpose of showing that postliberal theology is not antirealist. "The reading of postliberal theology as antirealist can admittedly appeal to occasional unfortunate passages, but it seems to me a clear misreading of the texts taken as a whole," he contends.

Marshall would go a step further. In his influential essay "Aquinas as Postliberal Theologian," he argues that the realism of Aquinas complements Lindbeck. Marshall's major work *Trinity and Truth* offers a rich blend of arguments drawn mainly from Aquinas, Lindbeck and analytic philosopher Donald Davidson. With Aquinas, whom he lauds as the church's best theologian of the divine triune ground of truth, Marshall argues that Christian theology must be "robustly trinitarian." With Lindbeck he argues that experience is belief-dependent and that experience therefore cannot provide the ground of meaning or the justification for beliefs (as Schleiermacher-style liberalism assumed). With Davidson he affirms a strong version of philosophical antifoundationalism, claiming that beliefs can be justified only by other beliefs. Put differently, beliefs are justified by their coherence with other beliefs that are not seriously questioned at a given time.

Says Marshall: “We cannot even figure out what sentences mean, and therefore what the contents of belief are, without relying on the concept of truth and the processes by which we decide whether sentences are true.” The antirealist position is thus unpersuasive, he contends. At the same time, the notion that truth means “correspondence with reality” is vacuous, for truth does not submit to intentional definition or informative equivalents. This is the crucial point at which Marshall parts company with Aquinas. Aquinas believed that a Christianized epistemological realism is viable as a theory of truth. Marshall counters that no epistemological theory provides a conceptual equivalent to truth. Truth is conceptually basic. At the recent American Academy of Religion convention, Marsall clarified that his thinking is “realist” if realism merely refers to the belief that there is a world created by God that is neither God nor us. But in most philosophical discussion, he observes, realism usually means a commitment to the correspondence theory of truth, the law of the excluded middle and a nonepistemic view of truth.

Trinity and Truth argues that this package of philosophical presuppositions is not the basis on which the credibility of Christian beliefs should be judged. Instead of subordinating Christian claims to realist (or other) canons of truth that stand outside Christianity, Marshall proposes, Christian thinkers should argue from an explicitly Christian standpoint. The justifying ground of Christian belief is the trinitarian and incarnational logic of biblical narrative as expressed in Christian liturgical practices. God grants us true beliefs in order to give us a share in God’s life. “I am bending the antiessentialist philosophical tradition to Christian purposes,” Marshall explains. His rethinking of the postliberal project amounts to a Christian reconceptualization of the correspondence theory of truth. In the movement of God’s Word in preaching and sacrament, God brings about a correspondence of our whole self to God’s self. The outwardly moving, self-relating divine ground of truth serves God’s purpose of making us bearers of Christ’s image by bringing us to true beliefs about God’s Triune self.

This argument brings postliberal theology closer to the idioms of Thomist metaphysics than anything that Hans Frei could have imagined. Marshall’s debt to Aquinas is deep and longstanding. With tongue slightly in cheek he remarks, “I used to believe that everything I believe, Aquinas also believed, but now I realize that Aquinas was wrong about a few things.”

Marshall reports that the argument of his book first occurred to him when he read Lindbeck’s *Nature of Doctrine*. “Lindbeck brought home to me, as did Hans Frei in a

different way, the idea that Christians can and should have their own ways of thinking about truth and about deciding what to believe," Marshall explains. "They need not take their truth claims on loan from some other intellectual or cultural quarter, or regard the only alternative to epistemic servitude as isolation from the broader human conversation about what is true."

The first part of this sentence is the Barthian key to postliberal theology; the second part underscores the determination to avoid the charge often leveled at postliberals— of wanting to take up residence in a ghetto of "intratextuality" and rely on "revelational positivism."

Though Marshall's argument is laden with the kind of category-splitting epistemological theorizing that Hauerwas usually resists, Hauerwas's forthcoming Gifford Lectures will commend Marshall for advancing Barth's project. Barth is the hero of Hauerwas's lectures, and the closing chapter gives a prominent role to Marshall's case for conceiving the Christian God as the truth, though it also suggests that Marshall underestimates the problem of cultural accommodation in modern theology.

Hauerwas remains ambivalent about the use of the term postliberalism ("I've never really thought of myself as being positioned beyond liberalism," he says), and he says he puts little stock in Lindbeck's theory of religion. Yet his writings are filled with attacks on theological liberalism, and he shares with Marshall the postliberal insistence that Christian speech is supposed to reflect the practices of Christian communities. "What was important to me in Lindbeck's book was his understanding of the church as the naming of Christian practices that put it at once in service to and over against the world."

For Hauerwas, accommodation to non-Christian assumptions is the fundamental failure of liberal theology. He sees such accommodation in the thought of theologian James Gustafson when he assumes the role of an "onlooker," posing questions to the Christian tradition.

In a 1998 exchange with Placher in the Christian Century, Gustafson charged that postliberals never give straight answers to questions about the historical credibility of biblical narrative or about the relation of Christian truth to the truth of other religions. In Gustafson's rendering, postliberal theology is essentially a strategy to avoid such questions "by limiting the intellectual and social context within which

theologians and pastors can think about what they are saying and doing." To Gustafson, the whole project smacks of a tribalist theology which exalts faithfulness to community identity "rather than openness to participation in the intersections of religious and theological outlooks with other outlooks on the same realities that religion and theology address."

Hauerwas challenges what he takes to be Gustafson's effort to assume the position of a naturalistic historian and thereby seize the high ground. Like Ernst Troeltsch, Hauerwas remarks, Gustafson is trying "to find a place to name history outside history . . . and it won't work." For his part, Hauerwas says, "I'm a historicist all the way down." Hauerwas adds that he admires Gustafson for being at least a consistent Troeltschian. "He's willing to give up the christological claims in order to be a Troeltschian." Hauerwas adds: "That Gustafson never enters into argument with Barth seems to me quite indicative."

This point often arises in conversations with postliberals. Though it is not quite true that Gustafson and other liberals "never enter into argument against Barth," there is a pronounced tendency in liberal theology to dismiss Barth's idea of truth as the self-authenticating word of God. Postliberals rightly complain that liberal critics repeatedly inveigh against a hoary insulated "neo-orthodoxy" that has little to do with Barth's rich and profound thinking.

As a rule postliberal thinkers are not categorical in defining their relationship to liberal theology. Many postliberals acknowledge that their positions on the historicity of biblical narrative and the religious truth contained in non-Christian religions are compatible with liberalism. In emphasizing the priority of the biblical narrative, they do not aim to set up Christianity as a totalizing ideology that provides what Gustafson calls "epistemic privileges." To say that Christians should allow the biblical world to absorb their own world, Placher explains, is to affirm that Christians should resist viewpoints and ideologies that are incompatible with the central claims of scriptural teaching and that Christians should consider whether scriptural narrative "might be unexpectedly helpful" in understanding their own lives.

To Green, postliberal theology is most valuable as a critique of theological liberalism. Its greatest challenge is to make Barthian claims about theology make sense to people who are not disposed to like them. "The part of *The Nature of Doctrine* that remains most compelling to me is its persuasive diagnosis of the fatal weakness of theological liberalism—its 'experiential expressivism'—and the corresponding

reminder that religion, like language and culture, shapes our most inward experiences rather than 'expresses' them," Green remarks. He judges that the biggest problem for Lindbeck-style theology is its failure to explain how the passive, receptive aspects of religion relate to religion's active, reconstructive aspects. Green's theorizing on imagination aims to tackle this problem, though he concedes that his thinking about imagination thus far has been fixated on its reproductive character at the expense of its active capacity. A more dialectical understanding of imagination could aid the cause, he allows, of making orthodoxy more generous and compelling.

"One of the hardest things about trying to follow Karl Barth is his apparent lack of interest in the liberal question of how theology can meet the challenges of modernity: historical criticism, the collapse of the 'house of authority,' the apparent disjunction between scientific and theological thinking, etc.," Green reflects. "I believe that valid Christian responses to these 'liberal' questions are implicit in Barth's theology, but they are couched in terms that most moderns simply cannot or will not hear."

Green views himself as taking a different approach from those—he would include Hauerwas in this camp—"who want simply to oppose Christian to secular-humanist approaches and sensibilities." Postliberal thinkers have to find new ways to connect with the secular people who surround them, Green urges. They have to speak the gospel in ways that secularized modern people can hear: "That's what led me to imagination in the first place, and I still believe that one can be true to the task of theology without compromising the essentials as did theological liberalism."

Lindbeck's *Nature of Doctrine* grew out of his personal involvement in the ecumenical movement. He was seeking to account for the modern phenomenon of theological consensus in various interdenominational discussions. This ecumenical concern is reflected in the postliberal commitment to developing Frei's "generous orthodoxy." In different ways, Green, Placher, Hauerwas and Marshall are all committed to renewing an orthodox Christian center. While disclaiming any nostalgia for neo-orthodoxy, the postliberal theologians are advancing the old neo-orthodox project of rethinking Christian orthodoxy in a modern spirit.

Some postliberals, such as Lindbeck, are especially interested in pursuing theological dialogues with evangelicals. Others are more interested in conversation with the Catholic tradition. Hauerwas observes that while Placher remains

“determinedly Reformed” in his approach to theology, “some of us are definitely becoming more Catholic in our thinking.” He does not believe that postliberal theology is likely to speak increasingly in an evangelical voice “unless you think that the most determinative evangelical voice among us today is that of John Paul II.”

A significant trend within the postliberal movement agrees with Hauerwas and Marshall that the best way to a generous orthodoxy heads in a Catholic direction. Theologically, philosophically, historically and liturgically, this group believes, evangelical Protestantism is too thin to be the best interlocutor for a vital Protestant theology of the new century. Hauerwas explains: “The problem with the evangelical voice is too often all it voices is the New Testament and now. That simply gives Christians an inadequate resource to confront the kind of world in which we are living.”

For Hauerwas and Marshall, the postliberal turn to Aquinas and the spiritual practices of the liturgical churches is linked to the original postliberal project of rethinking Christian orthodoxy in a postliberal spirit. Frei was an Episcopal priest; Lindbeck is a Lutheran ecumenist. Hauerwas remarks, “For me and my people, we will speak for the Catholic voice.” He expects that this is the future of evangelicalism too: “My own hunch is that evangelicals will increasingly move in a more churchly traditional manner for a recovery of the Catholic tradition.”

For years Gustafson, Max Stackhouse and others have charged that postliberal theology risks ghettoizing the church with its fixation on liturgical practices and on the ecclesial context of Christian speech. Meanwhile, liberation theologians have protested that postliberal theology is more concerned with Christian catechesis, formation and liturgy than with the struggle for social justice.

A mostly younger group of postliberals has taken up these criticisms. Kathryn Tanner, for example, criticizes postliberal theology for its tendency to insulate the church and theology from cultural pluralism, external criticism and issues of social justice. Serene Jones, David Kamitsuka (Oberlin College), Ian McFarland (Aberdeen), Gene Rogers (University of Virginia) and British theologians Rowan Williams and David Ford share affinities with this “progressive” form of postliberalism.

Tanner’s work reveals how different strands of thought are pushing postliberalism in new directions. She is significantly shaped by her sense of the postmodern intellectual climate and specifically by her understanding of postmodern culture. In

Tanner's telling, the modern view of culture conceives of culture as a self-contained unit with clear boundaries that separate one culture from another. Modern social theory and anthropology emphasize the way cultures provide norms that sustain social stability. Postmodern theory, on the other hand, plays up the lack of secure boundaries. It attends to hybrid cultures and to interactive boundaries. Unlike the idea of culture as a consensus-forming social phenomenon that resists change, the postmodern spirit is more impressed by the lack of consensus in cultures and by the dynamics for social change that already exist in cultures.

Tanner believes that modern theology has relied too much on a view of culture as a self-contained entity, and she argues that postliberal theology shares this deficiency. While postliberals have rightly perceived the importance of culture for Christian identity, they misuse Wittgenstein to serve their orthodox ends, says Tanner. Whereas Lindbeck and his followers invoke Wittgenstein to provide a rule-oriented "grammar" of Christian identity, Wittgenstein himself wanted to show how problematic is the idea of following a rule. "Wittgenstein maintains there is no way to single out the rule that is being followed by observing purported instances of its application," Tanner says. "While the postliberals are right about what leads to uniformity in the process of rule following, the Wittgensteinian point is that nothing fixes these communal norms in place."

Christian identity based on shared beliefs is a mirage, asserts Tanner. She presumably means that the identity is a mirage except as it is the product of a decidedly ungenerous orthodoxy. She contends that Christian identity exists in shared questions and discussion topics, not in shared beliefs. Under the authority of God's free Word, she contends—her work retains some Barthian glosses—Christian identity is constituted "by a community of argument concerning the meaning of true discipleship." She views her work as "a revised postliberalism" that addresses "many of the worries about its conservative methodological tendencies—for example, tendencies to insulate a Christian perspective from external criticism, and to ignore serious diversity, contest and change within Christianity." To her the term *postliberal* implies, or at least should imply, that one has moved through and beyond liberalism, not necessarily against it.

"The new and improved postliberalism I'm talking about incorporates the best of a Troeltschian liberalism within a theological method focusing on Christian particulars," she remarks. "I start where postliberalism usually starts but burst the usual boundaries of discussion by attention to the way the wider culture and other

religions are contested ingredients from the first in a Christian viewpoint.” In agreement with Troeltsch, Tanner opposes all claims for the absoluteness or superior truth of Christianity. Christians must not claim that Christian revelation makes Christianity superior to other religions, she believes: “What Christianity has going for it is its substantive proposal of a way of life—a way of life over which Christians argue in the effort to witness to and be disciples of Christ, and with which they enter into argument with others.”

Tanner’s brand of postliberalism places her closer to the classic liberal theologian Albrecht Ritschl than the neo-orthodox Barth on the fundamental question of the rules for making Christian claims. For Tanner, Christianity is true to the extent that it inspires attractive communities of faith. Metaphysical claims are out, as are Barth’s claims for theology as the explication of revelation.

Though she disclaims a substantive continuity with much of the liberal tradition, Tanner acknowledges that methodologically her work proceeds along liberal lines. To her, the boundaries of Lindbeck’s theory of religion provide no protection from the issues liberal theology has engaged. For this reason she refigures the ideal of a third way. She is interested is not so much in a third way between liberalism and conservatism, she explains, as in a third way between Yale postliberalism and the Chicago school of liberalism.

Today the advocates of Yale postliberalism and Chicago liberalism are probably outnumbered by those who, like Tanner, are trying to build bridges between these approaches. In many instances, the development of postliberal theology is following Barth’s own theological trajectory. Whereas in the 1920s and ’30s Barth claimed that the liberal theology in which he was trained was a terrible distortion, a wrong turn and a betrayal of Christ, in later life he took a more constructive and occasionally irenic approach to liberal theology. He wrote appreciative statements about Schleiermacher, he allowed that Schleiermacher might be interpreted as a theologian of the Holy Spirit, he emphasized the humanity of God in contrast to the Wholly Other, he called human beings “covenant-partners of God,” and he looked for “parables” of grace and truth in non-Christian religions and ideologies. Though Barth grieved in his later life that most theologians rejected his approach to theology in favor of current cultural and hermeneutical fads, he looked for Word-oriented allies wherever he could find them, and for the most part he did not persist in claiming that liberalism was the fatal problem in modern theology.

A significant sector of the postliberal school has similarly reconsidered its characterization of liberal theology as alien or fundamentally mistaken. Whether theologians like Tanner can move in this direction without giving up the Barthian heart of the postliberal experiment remains to be seen.

Part of the complexity in charting the theological world comes from the fact that Lindbeck's influential account of liberal theology as "experiential-expressivist" describes only a small part of actually existing theological liberalism. Lindbeck's "experiential-expressivist" model does a reasonably good job of accounting for the romantic and mystical streams of liberal theology, but it does not account for variants of liberal theology that make gospel-centered claims (such as the tradition of evangelical liberalism), that base their affirmations on metaphysical arguments (such as the Whiteheadian process school) or that appeal to gospel norms and metaphysical arguments (such as the Boston personalist school). These are the most important schools of American liberal theology of the past century. Moreover, Lindbeck's account of theological liberalism fares no better as a description of the theologies of such contemporary liberals as Brian Gerrish, Landon Gilkey, James Gustafson, Peter Hodgson, Marjorie Suchocki or David Tracy. His critique misses at least this much of the target. In that regard, Tanner is right not to follow those postliberals who invest great significance in Lindbeck's critique of theological liberalism. And she is right that theology must come to terms with a more pluralistic understanding of culture. The emergence of a multiculturalist, strongly feminist "Barthian" trend in theology is a most welcome development in a field that has known more than its share of stodgy antifeminists.

But in moving away from Barth's Word-oriented approach to theology, the postmodern revisers may be relinquishing the Barthian impulse that gave postliberal theology its dynamism and coherence. They could be lapsing into the kind of postliberalism that has no "post" at all.

There is an equal danger that a Thomist-leaning philosophical theology could have a similar effect in a different direction, trying to save theology by modernizing Aquinas. The Thomist postliberals and the postmodernist postliberals will relinquish too much if they disparage the credibility of doing theology in Barth's style as exegesis of God's free, self-authenticating, Spirit-illuminated Word. Barth's warnings against embedding Christian truth claims in any prior theory of knowledge apply in the present case: if Christianity has no eschatological Word to explicate, then we are left only with liberal naturalism and historicism.

Barth insisted that to hear scriptural narrative as God's Word has nothing necessarily to do with defending its historical character or some particular historical element within it. His point was not that scriptural narrative contains no historical elements, but rather that the Bible's historical elements are always mixed with myth, saga and related forms of expression as vehicles of the Word. The Word is apprehended as event. It is never an object of perception or cognition. It does not seek to be mastered in order to be understood; rather it seeks to lay hold of us.

Postliberal theology at its best has held fast to these Barthian themes. It has embraced Barth's nonfoundationalist spirit and his methodological pluralism while correcting his dogmatic lapses, his lack of interest in interreligious dialogue and his antifeminism. If truth is grace, it can be known only through grace. Postliberal theologians would do well not to give up this Barthian principle.