

# Liberal questions: A response to William Placher

by [James Gustafson](#) in the [April 14, 1999](#) issue

William Placher's reply to my inquiries about "postliberal" theology (April 7) is necessarily brief, and this response to him must be briefer than desirable. I think, however, that it is important for this discussion to take place. The "Troeltschian" questions that I have raised--about historical and cultural relativity, about the relation of Christianity to other faiths, and about the relation of Christianity to the methods and findings of modern science--are not foreign to pastors and members of their congregations. Straightforward discussion of them will make some pastors and parishioners very uncomfortable, but others will be relieved to have their ponderings explicitly addressed. I will follow the order of Placher's reply.

Placher missed what I asked for in seeking a definition of postliberal theology; a genealogy of any movement, theological, political or scientific, does not define it. Such an account, however, does show a particular social location of its inception, at Yale--a place where I taught for 17 years. And Placher specifies some of the authors his generation of graduate students at Yale were moved by their mentors to go beyond. Yet the three Americans named--Schubert Ogden, Gordon Kaufman and David Tracy--if they constitute "the center of mainline academic theology," form an exceedingly broad center, since each approaches theological issues from very different perspectives and comes out with very different systematic positions. The warrant for naming them together, I think, would be that each faces Christian theology with the kind of Troeltschian interpretation of the intellectual and cultural issues that I am suggesting Christians (not confined to theologians) confront in our time. And perhaps one warrant for moving more to narrative theology is that it frees Christians from having to confront the three principal questions I'm raising. Narrative theology can provide relief from these questions by limiting the intellectual and social context within which theologians and pastors can think about what they are saying and doing.

Placher's qualification, "we inevitably bring . . . assumptions" to a reading of the biblical narrative, despite efforts to avoid starting with a cultural framework, is worth underscoring and applying to the positions of postliberals themselves. Narrative theology, like the wider preference for narrative in scholarly studies, simply begins with a different cultural and philosophical framework than does, for example, Troeltsch.

A different account of Placher's puzzle over liberalism's identity in the 1990s is possible, but that would be a digression. It may be helpful to note, however, that an account of the perceptions and interpretations of the cultural context of theology and church life is as important as a description of a current trend in some graduate schools. Liberation theology was *de rigueur* in many seminaries and denominational headquarters not long ago; an accurate analysis of its diminished visibility and audibility would have to be very multidimensional. So, I think, would any analysis of the apparent effectiveness of postliberal theology and many things similar to it.

Placher's answer in (1b) to the question about whether God chose to reveal Godself in a unique way in Jesus is as straightforward as anyone could ask for. I can only speculate about how persons who answer so honestly might also go on to say, "Yes, and . . ." or "Yes, but . . ." What are the implications of the "yes" for practical as well as intellectual relations to Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, persons with a powerful sense of divinity who are not in Christian congregations, and others? What inferences are such persons to draw from the "yes" with reference to their religious traditions and life outlooks? Does the "yes" indicate that all others are in error, and that, like the old Roman Catholic teaching, error has to be tolerated because not to do so would affect the common good? Does it mean that the television evangelists--which the old sociologist of religion in me observes--are correct in informing me that if I do not believe that "yes," I am condemned to the fires of Hades?

My guess is that most postliberals do not wish to be confrontational in ways these questions indicate; they do get along with Jews, Muslims and others, and with persons with natural piety. Does the capacity to do so indicate honestly that the religious error of saying "no" is tolerated? Or that one affirms the "yes," but it really does not make that much difference? Or, if my surmise that postliberal Christians are not confrontational is accurate, does that suggest that maybe the "yes" should go on, "yes, but . . ."

Placher's answer to my question about the relative truth or falsity of religious claims touches upon my comment that current forms of epistemological relativism provide a justification for affirming the truth of beliefs without worrying about whether they are true for more than those who affirm them. This is an important matter both within the boundaries of postliberal--or any other kind of--theology, as well as across the boundaries of theology and other intellectual endeavors which interpret the same phenomena that theology interprets, but in radically different ways. Placher chooses to answer the question more in the latter context than the former. I would like postliberals to address the issues among themselves, and then reflect upon their answers for the wider context.

If all who might call themselves postliberal do not agree on some things (Placher indicates he has some disagreements with Martin Copenhaver and Anthony Robinson), how do they go about deciding which is the most adequate opinion? Placher counsels that we should start with what we can agree to. But something about narrative theology (and narrative in other disciplines as well) that has inhibited its lure is how its proponents decide which narrative is preferable even within the larger whole they generally agree upon--biblical narrative. (In the context of a pedagogical endeavor I recently argued the plausibility of John Howard Yoder's account of the New Testament narrative of Jesus' life and teachings, but my narrative-sensitive audience contended that Yoder got the story all wrong.) There have to be criteria for at least plausibility, if not truth claims, to settle differences among postliberal (and any other "school" of) theologians.

Regarding the question (2) about other religions, Placher cites the writings of J. A. DiNoia. I don't know his work, but I find the phrase "providential diversity of religions" to be interesting, and Placher's sentence that follows--"Jesus Christ reveals and anticipates the culmination of God's will for creation, and in that sense Christianity is uniquely right about what is most important in the ultimate purpose of things"--is worthy of some queries. Perhaps I am a skeptic. Perhaps I have studied too many books which question whether there is an ultimate purpose to things, and many which offer different interpretations of the ultimate purpose of things, and some which try to figure out how one could decide these matters. Here traditional orthodox Christianity and postliberal versions are, and must be, forthrightly revelational; the "yes" in (1b) and its implications for (2) are backed by a view that what is revealed in Christ reveals the ultimate purpose of things. No evidences from human experiences (Holocaust, hurricanes, slavery) or from other interpretations

(evolutionary theory and Marxism) will ever count against the revelation, whatever the content of the "ultimate purpose" might be. My own consternation about this view was evoked by one particular Christian interpretation--that God created all things for the sake of the human. But this is not the place to rehearse the many reasons why I think such a belief is wrong.

It is clear that postliberal theology and church life want to be generous to other religions and can find theological justifications for their generosity. But at the same time they want Placher's "yes." "It may well be that God's will is best served by some adherents of other religions pursuing their own traditions to their depths," Placher writes. But it may just as well be that such pursuit "serves God's will" by demonstrating the limitations of Christian theology and experience. And an old historical relativist perspective reminds me that, like most Christians, my being such is an accident of history and biology just as accidents of history determine other religious traditions and who belongs to them.

Regarding (3), my question about our ability to see our daily lives absorbed by the biblical world, Placher uses anecdotes which, unfortunately, do not address the complexity of my initial inquiry about postliberal theology. I agree that visions of the world which try to dictate details collapse. And every tradition or ideology or academic discipline that seeks to transmit and sustain itself over time necessarily is involved in a "cultural-linguistic" method-- interpreting realities in the light of convictions. That is a sociological, not a theological, observation.

Placher writes, "But if the biblical world absorbs our world, then we will try (a) not to hold views incompatible with what we take to be its central claims, and (b) regularly to consider whether its categories might be unexpectedly helpful in understanding any aspect of our lives." The (a) part of the sentence seems to suggest that if interpretations of realities from physics to psychology, from biology to dramas, cannot cohere with central claims from the Bible, then they are--what? False? Inadequate? Susceptible to having a meaning overlayed on them which irons out tensions or contradictions with the biblical? Is "the biblical world" untouched by insights and knowledge from other sources? Postliberals are liberal if they find the evangelical Protestants' continuing battle with evolutionary theory to be wrong. And if evolutionary theory can be accommodated by calling creation accounts myths, presumably other aspects of the biblical world need to be corrected or altered in meaning when confronted by materials from more sources of knowledge than I wish to list. Or does postliberal theology invite us to lead lives of what, for decades, was

called cognitive dissonance? Alas, there may be more persons in congregations who are disturbed by cognitive dissonance than theologians and pastors acknowledge.

And is there one biblical world ? It seems trivial to ask that question, since differences in theology and in religious and moral outlooks and life have appealed to different "biblical worlds," beginning with the New Testament itself. But it has to be asked. (In my daily biblical readings I have been pondering passages I would like never to have to use as texts for sermons. There are many, but from recent weeks, try Psalm 58.)

Placher does not appeal to the notion that the biblical view and Christians represent a "cognitive minority" in contemporary cultural and intellectual life. Some others do, and that may be true as a sociological observation. Minorities do not, for that reason, have epistemic privileges.

Nor do Placher's anecdotes address my interest in seeing, for example, how political, historical and ethnographic interpretations of the persistent conflicts in what we call the Middle East would be reinterpreted from the biblical view. Would such an interpretation be more accurate? With reference to what? Would it provide a better basis for resolution of conflicts? Would it simply say that the meaning of events is different when seen in the context of a biblical view? If that is the case, would a postliberal reinterpretation of a political interpretation differ, in principle, from the interpretation of Jerry Falwell?

With reference to (b) in the quotation above, I concede that the biblical view might be unexpectedly helpful in understanding aspects of our lives. But so might Gary Becker's economic interpretation of our behavior or Melvin Konner's bioanthropological interpretation. Special authority for the biblical view cannot be claimed on the grounds of its potential utility in understanding life; other sources of potential utility can make the same claim. Something more has to be affirmed, namely, that what one understands from the biblical view is deeper or truer. And, again, what are the criteria for evaluation?

On this point, as throughout his response, Placher is duly modest, as we all have to be. He wants to find out how much the biblical world can absorb--which entails, I should think, determining what it cannot absorb and why it cannot, and judging whether what it cannot absorb is sufficiently reliable as to require discarding something biblical.

Placher's response in (3b) to the question about God's intervention in the world should be more complicated than he makes it. My question was not whether God is always acting in the world, but whether God intervenes in particular ways to answer the particular petitions of Christians for particular outcomes. To say that God is always acting in the world is like saying that God is always ordering the world. Neither claim, at that level of generality, helps one judge whether particular "actions" of God are intentional agential responses to particular petitions. Placher's anecdote is susceptible, as he would readily acknowledge, to other interpretations and explanations than he gives. To take recourse to "some relations of a sort unknown to me between my praying and what happened" is to admit agnosticism.

I hoped that my initial question would lead to both theological and religious reflection on whether the Deity is more an impersonal power ordering all things or an intentional agent, active like human agents are. This was one of Troeltsch's concerns in the face of scientific accounts of events as they were understood in his time. My concern is not only with grand cosmological interpretations of how the universe came to be and what it is likely to become, nor only with sociobiological interpretations of the basis of morals and religions, but also with more particular biochemical genetic research and neurosciences. Barth and others would say that such knowledge is about phenomenal man, and not the real human. And the question is not whether, for example, in the neurological processes and structures there is evidence for God. It is whether such accounts, revisable as they are, require changes in traditional theological interpretations of human "nature" and activity. Placher's Sam, one might suggest, died of inexorable physiological causes written into the impersonal ordering of nature, ultimately by the Deity.

Placher's reply to (4) gets at one of the wonderings which provoked my questions: Is there a right flank to postliberal theology, relative to evangelical Protestantism and other quite conservative theological and religious movements? He speaks for himself, as he does throughout his response, and I find his personal pauses to be helpful. His points are probably acceptable to persons who would consider themselves "liberal" Christians rather than postliberal.

I appreciate that Placher accepted the editors' invitation to respond to my queries. Both he and I could say much more, press each other for more precision, and do so with mutual respect. My concerns are not only about academic theology and academic theological ethics. They are about the church, ministers and members of congregations. To be sure, the world I inhabited for decades led me to develop most

of my closest personal and professional relationships with secularized persons and with faithful adherents of other religious traditions. Academics and intellectuals are members of "the real world," though not the only ones.

I cannot provide numbers, but I am convinced that there are Christians in churches, clergy and others, who would appreciate forthright discussions of answers to my Troeltschian questions. Surely, among various reasons people have left churches or are not joining them is the fact that matters I have raised, and William Placher has responded to, are not openly addressed. That is the point of my conjecture that Christians' first language, the language used to interpret daily events of many different orders of magnitude, is not biblical. That was the point behind a previous submission of mine to this journal, "Don't exaggerate!" (Oct. 29, 1997).

In times when other forces determine the interpretations of events, nature, human life and what have you, more than religious ones do, it is, in my view, a temptation to find philosophical, theological and ethical positions that can disengage Christians from intentional interactions with alternatives. Faithfulness to what gives distinctive identity to the religious community becomes the celebrated norm, 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.

No one inhabits only one frame of reference, one community of interpretation, in our society and culture. Religious outlooks do not have epistemic privileges in the intersections. The modern world that Troeltsch construed as the context in which religious life and thought existed a hundred years ago (and Schleiermacher a hundred years before that) is still with us, and more complex than it was then. Theologians, pastors and other Christians have to confront it and respond, even if that makes them despised "liberals."