Being postliberal: A response to James Gustafson

by William C. Placher in the April 7, 1999 issue

The editors have asked me--as, I assume, some sort of certified postliberal--to respond to James Gustafson's questions. For several reasons, I was probably a fool to agree.

First, in a lifetime of work, Gustafson has maintained the highest standards of clarity. Addressing big questions in a short space, I will almost certainly fail to meet his criteria for "clarification." Second, when George Lindbeck christened a nascent theological movement "postliberal," he didn't copyright the term. It gets used by all sorts of people I don't recognize as members of the tribe (including, at some points, Anthony Robinson and Martin Copenhaver in their recent *Christian Century* articles), and even among those who seem to me properly so labeled there are many disagreements. So I will inevitably generalize inappropriately. Third, in responding to Gustafson's letter in public, I'm of necessity writing to two audiences--to readers of the *Century* and to Gustafson himself. I risk either insulting Gustafson by telling him things he already knows or getting two technical for many other readers; I'll probably do a little of both.

That said, the traditional role of fools is to rush in.

More seriously, Gustafson's questions seem so important that someone should have a try at answering them. If I myself fail to clarify, perhaps I will draw a response from Gustafson (or protests from fellow postliberals that I have misrepresented them) that will achieve some clarification. At least it's worth a try.

A basic definition: "postliberalism" is the school of theology shaped by Hans Frei, George Lindbeck and some of their friends and students--also called "the Yale school," or "narrative theology." All these labels seem for various reasons awkward, but Lindbeck himself has used "postliberal," so it's hard for him or his students to object to it. James Gustafson, however, has some hard questions to raise about "postliberal theology."

1a) *What sort of liberalism is postliberalism "post"?* To start with, it is "post" a philosophical or theological liberalism, not a political one. Politically, postliberals seem all over the map, but many share a theological history.

When I was in graduate school in the early 1970s, Schubert Ogden, Gordon Kaufman and David Tracy (as then represented by *Blessed Rage for Order*) seemed to be roughly at the center of "mainline" academic theology in the U.S. At most major graduate schools, few students read Barth. Bultmannians dominated New Testament scholarship, with their focus on interpreting individual sayings and stories and with little interest in literary approaches to scripture. The dominant view seemed to be that theologians should join Bultmannian exegesis with some sort of metaphysics, process or otherwise. Ogden would be the classic case, and his was a powerful voice.

In contrast, Hans Frei argued, first, that we ought to stop reading the Bible with primary attention to the historical context of individual passages and attend more to the shape of the biblical narratives, and, second, that we could read the biblical narratives best if, as much as possible, we started with those narratives rather than beginning with a cultural or philosophical framework into which we tried to make their meanings fit. Of course, we inevitably bring all sorts of ad hoc assumptions to our reading, but, as we read, we should keep questioning them and resist trying to form them into a system (since, once systematized, they would likely be harder to challenge). Frei also got a lot of us excited about reading Barth.

I must here acknowledge a puzzle. As Gustafson implies, the standard story of contemporary North American theology is that, long before the early '70s, "neo-orthodoxy," and above all the influence of Barth, had beaten back "liberalism." I still more or less teach that story to my students. Yet some version of "neoliberalism"--or "liberal revisionism"--seemed clearly dominant in university-related divinity schools by the time I came along. It owed a lot to Ogden's reading of Bultmann and a reading of Tillich as primarily in conversation with Hartshorne and Eliade, but it tended to dismiss Barth out of hand. Its relation to "neo-orthodoxy" (itself a problematic term) and earlier liberalism is thus hard to define, but it was this "neoliberalism" that I think some theologians of my generation thought we were rejecting by becoming "postliberals."

Robinson and Copenhaver imply that the "neo-orthodox" revolution never really reached the churches where they grew up, and it didn't reach mine either. I'd

welcome some empirical study of how far it did reach.

1b) *Do postliberals claim that God chose to reveal Godself in a unique and exclusive way in a single historical event, Jesus Christ?* Yes.

1c) *Do postliberals think there are no ways to grade the better or worse, if not the truth or falsity, of historically relative claims?* If I may hawk my own wares, in *Unapologetic Theology* (Westminster John Knox, 1989) I argued at length that "true" doesn't mean just "true for me" or "true for us," but simply means "true"--everywhere and always. We may be wrong, but that's what we assert when we claim that a belief is true. But the ways of *arguing* for the truth of a large-scale theory may be complicated and historically conditioned. To use an example from Jeffrey Stout, if I say, "Slavery is wrong," I mean that it is wrong everywhere and always. But in trying to persuade someone else of that claim I would have to appeal to assumptions drawn from particular historical traditions--different arguments, therefore, for different conversation partners.

In any conversation, we start wherever we happen to agree, and see where we can get, without postponing the conversation until we can find a starting point on which everyone would agree (suspecting that there probably isn't such a point). A good many philosophers of science would make similar claims concerning arguments for large-scale scientific theories, and I think something similar is what Hans Frei and William Werpehowski mean by "ad hoc apologetics."

2) *What are postliberal attitudes toward religions other than Christianity?* I would here follow the lead of my friend J. A. DiNoia (*The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective*, Catholic University of America Press, 1992). DiNoia rejects Rahner's model of good Buddhists or Muslims being "anonymous Christians" because, he says, it too easily assumes that Buddhists or Muslims are trying to do the same thing Christians are, but are less successful at it. At the same time, DiNoia would agree with Gustafson, against Troeltsch, that we cannot make a case for Christianity by claiming that it is, humanly, a "better religion." Rather, he invites us to think about a "providential diversity of religions."

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. But other religions bring their own insights to understanding that purpose and how we might contribute to it, and it may well be that God's will is best

served by some adherents of other religions pursuing their own traditions to their depths. Gandhi, to take one dramatic example, may have given the world (and even Christianity) more by remaining a Hindu than he would have contributed as a Christian convert. And, we can hope and trust, God does not discard or abandon those who have served God's will.

3a) *Can we really expect to absorb the world of our daily lives into the biblical world?* I wouldn't want to be silly about this. A good worldview leaves many particulars underdetermined. Neither "the modern scientific worldview" nor Marxism nor postliberal Christianity has much to tell us about which baseball team to root for, or whether to prefer Brahms or the blues, or about many other aspects of our lives. Visions of the world that try to dictate every detail quickly collapse of their own weight. 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 aspects of our lives.

An example: A church-supported social worker I know was regularly invited out from the inner city to suburban congregations to describe his work and his concerns. For some time, he gave "political" speeches about the injustices of American society. His audiences either rejected him angrily or smiled condescendingly and said, "Well, that's what you liberals believe, of course, but we're Republicans out here."

Then he started asking if he could lead people in Bible study over several weeks. Beginning with texts they shared (admittedly, he usually picked Amos or the Sermon on the Mount), he and his audiences learned from each other in ways that challenged the assumptions of both sides. In a modest way, wasn't the biblical world absorbing the world of their daily lives?

My own experience in fights among Presbyterians is that one of our problems is that, lacking biblical or theological literacy, we have only the language and categories of contemporary politics to discuss most issues before us. And that language only serves to confirm how much we disagree. To take another example: If I go to my pastor, I don't want just psychological counseling--I can find someone better trained in that elsewhere. And if my pastor has only the language of contemporary psychology with which to help me think about my life, then he or she has no alternative to the better-trained psychologist down the street to offer. In short, Christians don't seem, in a variety of contexts, to function well *as Christians* if they

let various contemporary languages take over the discourse of their communities.

I don't know how much the biblical world can "absorb," but I want to find out. I think that we mainline Protestants, at least, would be well served if we tried its absorptive powers more often and more extensively.

3b) *Do postliberals believe in a personal God who engages in particular interventions into events from hurricanes to headaches in order to answer prayers?*

This gets a bit more complicated. Postliberals don't picture a God who occasionally intervenes in the world but normally lets it run its own course. Rather (like Aquinas, Calvin, Edwards and others), we think that God is continually the sustaining cause of the whole world. Calvin put metaphysical principle into the language of myth: "If God should but withdraw His hand a little, all things would immediately perish and dissolve into nothing" (Commentary on Genesis 2:2). One might even think, as Maurice Wiles has proposed, of "the gradual emergence of our world as a single divine act. In other words it is a purposeful occurrence, whose disparate features are held together by a unity of intention" (God's Action in the World, SCM, 1986). So the question isn't, "Does God sometimes intervene in the world?" since God is always acting in world. (See Kathryn Tanner, God and Creation in Christian Theology, Blackwell, 1988.)

Gustafson raises a particular question about God's intervention. What do we mean when we say things like "Sam was sick, and I prayed for him, and he recovered." Or "Sam was sick, and I prayed for him, and he died, but I hope that he found peace in dying and that dying was for him part of the will of the God who understands all things." As Austin Farrer insisted, in such cases we have no understanding of the "causal joint" between my prayers and what happened to Sam. But if God is gracious, then perhaps the God who has no need of my prayers so made the world that there would be some relation of a sort unknown to me between my praying and what happened to Sam--not so that Sam should be grateful to me for praying, but so that I should be grateful to God for giving meaning to my prayers.

4) *If postliberals aren't liberals, aren't you really just orthodox evangelical Christians?*

For several generations much of evangelical theology, particularly in the U.S., has been locked into a kind of philosophical positivism. From tracts about the historical evidence for the resurrection or against Darwinism to the more sophisticated

apologetics of, say, *Christianity Today* (though there are recent moves there in new directions), evangelicals have talked about "arguments" and "facts" in a way that owes more to particular strands of modern empiricism than to the Christian tradition.

In an exchange with the evangelical theologian Carl Henry, who was pressing him to say whether he believed the empty tomb was a "fact" or not, Hans Frei once remarked:

If I am asked to use the language of factuality, then I would say, yes, in those terms, I have to speak of an empty tomb. In those terms I have to speak of a literal resurrection. But I think those terms are not privileged, theory-neutral, transcultural, an ingredient in the structure of the human mind and of reality always and everywhere for me, as I think they are for Dr. Henry. Now that may mean, you see, that I am looking for a way that doesn't exist between evangelicalism on the one hand and liberalism on the other. If that's the case, well, so be it. But it may also be that I am looking for a way that looks for a relation between Christian theology and philosophy that disagrees with a view of certainty and knowledge which liberals and evangelicals hold in common *(Theology and Narrative*).

Too many evangelicals are not modern enough in some respects (continuing to fight rearguard battles against Darwin, for instance) because they are too modern in other respects (accepting definitions of truth, argument and evidence characteristic of one sort of modern empiricism). Postliberals, to oversimplify, would want to do it the other way round.

Whose side am I on? Well, that depends. Sometimes, talking with liberal Southern Baptists disgusted by the direction their denomination has taken and open to new ideas, I see exciting possibilities of joining with them in what Frei called a "generous orthodoxy." On other occasions, I get invited to the wrong evangelical meeting and find that the issue is still refuting the theory of evolution or, even worse, I find that I have wandered by mistake into what seems to be the ecclesial wing of the Republican right. Then I am sure that I have far more in common with a "generous liberalism" like Jim Gustafson's. I hope that such uncertainties do not seem "unstraightforward" or worse to someone I have admired so much for so long.