

Reclaiming Liberal Faith: Toward a Renewed Theology of Integration

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I share Peter Berger's conviction that liberalism "embodies *precisely* the balance between skepticism and affirmation that ... defines the only acceptable way of being a Christian without emigrating from modernity."¹ Yet today liberal theology in America is in the midst of a crisis greater than any it has faced heretofore.

The steady decrease in membership in liberal churches is not news, of course. But, as the most recent U.S. Religious Landscape Survey shows, "the United States is on the verge of becoming a minority Protestant country"; according to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, only 51% of Americans still report that they are members of Protestant denominations.² Evangelical Protestant churches, together with historically black Protestant churches, make up 33.2% of the overall adult population, whereas mainline Protestant churches now represent only 18.1% of that population.³ Moreover, the "graying" of the mainline continues; roughly half the members of mainline churches are age 50 and older.⁴

The 2008 Pew report notes a new pattern: "the proportion of the population that is Protestant has declined markedly in recent decades while the proportion of the population that is not affiliated with any particular religion has increased significantly" (ibid., 18). Throughout the period of the '70s and '80s, a constant 60 - 65% of respondents identified themselves as Protestant. The early '90s began a period of steady decline. By 2006 both the Pew survey and the General Social Surveys (GSS) found Protestant affiliation down to roughly 50%. Most of the overall decline is due to the rapid membership drop in the mainline churches. The Pew report notes, "What scholars who have analyzed the GSS data have found is that the proportion of the population identifying with the large mainline Protestant denominations has declined significantly in recent decades, while the proportion of Protestants identifying with the large evangelical denominations has increased" (ibid.).

A Tipping Point?

In the last few years the declines in the mainline denominations seem to have hit a tipping point.⁵ The institutions supported by liberal churches no longer have the membership or financial base to survive. At a number of one-time bastions of liberal thought, such as Harvard Divinity School, one sees growing support for ceasing to do theology altogether and for replacing it with religious studies, cultural criticism, or the history of religious thought. Other schools, such as Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and to some extent Princeton Seminary, have shifted in a more conservative direction, partly because evangelical students and more conservative funders seem to offer the only reliable source of support, and hence survival, for these schools. Given decreasing church support, seminaries such as Claremont School of Theology are looking to broaden out beyond their service role to their denominations to become small universities, hoping thereby to find sources of financial support to counteract decreasing contributions from the mainline churches.

It would be false, however, to conclude that the crisis is only institutional and financial. Since Schleiermacher, liberal theologians have engaged the best of scientific, historical, and philosophical scholarship from a distinctively Christian standpoint. Their work has had incalculable cultural and intellectual impacts, including some indirect impacts on conservative churches and on other religious traditions. But the only direct *religious* heirs to this great tradition are to be found in the mainline churches and the institutions supported by them. And yet the leaders and theologians of these institutions seem to have lost Schleiermacher's vision for an ambitious modern theology that integrates the best of contemporary thought with the best of the classical theological tradition. We are more likely to downplay or even suppress the particularities of our tradition in favor of ethical and political commitments that we share with secular progressives and other religious traditions. One senses in this change a crisis of confidence, an uncertainty about what it is — if anything — that makes the liberal Christian stance unique. This uncertainty has everything to do with the stuttering voice of contemporary liberalism.

A similar crisis of confidence, almost an insecurity complex, characterizes dialogues with evangelicals — when constructive dialogue takes place at all. Given the common ground that we still share with the more conservative wings of the Christian church, and given the distinctive strengths in scholarship and integrative thinking that we bring to the table, we should be able to enter into these dialogues with complete confidence and a calm knowledge of the importance of our unique contribution. For some reason this is not happening. Our voices are equally muted, I fear, when it comes to challenging the

generically anti-religious biases in many secular liberal authors. Thus liberal Christians have remained strangely silent in the face of the virulent attacks on religion stemming from the group of scientists and philosophers of science known as the New Atheists (Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens).

Consider the case of Dawkins. Dawkins has made clear that his target is every form of religion; he draws no distinctions between liberals and fundamentalists:

Christianity, just as much as Islam, teaches children that unquestioned faith is a virtue. You don't have to make the case for what you believe. If somebody announces that it is part of his faith, the rest of society, whether of the same faith, or another, or of none, is obliged, by ingrained custom, to 'respect' it without question; respect it until the day it manifests itself in a horrible massacre like the destruction of the World Trade Center, or the London or Madrid bombings.⁶

All religious faith is the same, and all of it is evil: "Faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument... Faith can be very very dangerous, and deliberately to implant it into the vulnerable mind of an innocent child is a grievous wrong."⁷ Critical or hypothetical faith is not on Dawkins' radar screen. Nor is any naturalized or non-supernaturalistic notion of God. He makes this amply clear: "I am not attacking any particular version of God or gods. I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented."⁸

Dawkins' book sold over a million copies in the first twelve months after its release. The liberal silence in response is puzzling.⁹ Yet it is, I fear, only one manifestation of a broader inability to speak with a powerful and united voice today.

What Went Wrong?

In part the crisis in liberal theology is institutional. As we saw, the number of mainline Christians has decreased steadily for almost half a century. Denominational activities have been curtailed; denominational seminaries are struggling; and a liberal Christian readership simply doesn't exist today in the way it did in an earlier period of American religious history. I have suggested that we have reached a tipping point at which the theology and institutions of the liberal church are now collapsing.

From a strategic perspective it's not difficult to say where we failed. Few of us

remained church theologians. We voted with our feet, and with our priorities. We were on the whole more concerned with broad societal movements. Some of us thought the church would follow; others thought it would be strengthened in the process of carrying out our reforms; still others didn't really care. Perhaps we found the church too stodgy, or we associated churches with the "church theology" of figures like Karl Barth. There are exceptions of course — one can name a few liberal theologians who were also church leaders — but overall the exceptions prove the rule. By contrast, evangelical theologians continue to do theology for the church, and the evangelical churches have flourished as a result. To note this difference is not to make a moral judgment; we were not wrong by definition. *But it was a strategic error:* we didn't create a stronger church, and we failed to replace the church with other viable institutions to which people had a "thick" allegiance.¹⁰

Of course, religious liberals did create significant institutions that played vital roles in American society. But these either became secular organizations or remained by and large "parachurch" organizations, which meant (one now recognizes in retrospect) that they were institutionally parasitic on other "thicker" groupings, such as church congregations and denominations. During the time that many of us were trained, civic organizations and movements were able to create strong bonds and levels of commitment for many Americans. One thinks of the civil rights movement in the 1960's, the early history of liberation theology, the women's movement, the sanctuary movement, and the early phases of the environmental movement. Who could have predicted the steady evacuation of those deeper bonds that once characterized these powerful social movements — movements in which we were investing the future of liberal theology? And who could have predicted the increasingly rapid growth of evangelical and charismatic churches, which (statistically speaking) have become virtually the only Christian religious groups that are managing to spawn and support extremely strong levels of religious affiliation and commitment today?

The irony, of course, is that *we* were the ones who were advocating that religion, like all other significant spheres of human life, must be communal, corporate, and political, rather than private, individualistic, and subjectivistic. Given our emphasis on corporate-level analysis, we should have been precisely the ones to realize that liberal theology could only survive and flourish if we invested deeply in building sustainable, vibrant communities.¹¹ Equally ironically, it was those individualistic evangelicals who in the end knew how to build communities in terms of which their followers could and did define their most basic identities.

The prophetic insights of Peter Berger in his 1992 book, *A Far Glory*¹², have been corroborated in the years since the book's publication. Berger predicted that conservative religious groups would increasingly define themselves in opposition to the ruling mores of the society, while liberal religious groups would be perceived as indistinguishable from the surrounding culture. Surveys of religious attitudes show that exactly these predictions have come true. We share the uncomfortable fate of representing the great Protestant tradition of reformation and integration, of advocating deep Christian values that are (in my view) profound and sustainable, while at the same time presiding over empty churches, struggling organizations, and an ever-decreasing share of the religious market.

What Would It Take to Resurrect Liberal Theology?

I am a convert to liberal theology, having come to it by conviction out of an atheist upbringing and a stint in the very conservative wing of the church. Perhaps that history accounts for my (as it were) evangelical fervor for the strengths and importance of liberal religion. Like other converts, I am mystified by the widespread doubts among mainline leaders about the viability of liberal theology, and by the eagerness of liberal divinity schools like Harvard to replace their theological heritage with work in religious studies. I am convinced that the process that Peter Berger describes, in which liberal churches lose all distinctive content and become indistinguishable from secular liberals, is not our unavoidable fate.

Proclamations of the death of religious liberalism are premature. To the contrary: a broadly liberal theology is the form of religious response that makes *most sense* in our present context. It neither circles the wagons to exclude the contemporary world, seeking to return to the mind set of the first century, nor does it require one to hold the same assumptions of naturalism, materialism, and reductionism that are dominant in scientific circles and presupposed by many secular liberals in our culture.

I believe we can identify the central features of the liberal heritage that, taken together, offer a viable and powerful form of religious response for the contemporary world. This task must be carried out in two parts. We must first see where and why 20th-century liberal thinkers were led astray in one of their key projects: the response to and gradual affirmation of scientific naturalism. As we come to understand that history and its mistakes, we can begin to formulate what is the enduring core of the liberal Christian theological program.

How We Got Here: Liberalism, Naturalism, and Science

Historically, the development of American liberal religious thought was closely associated with the defense of naturalism. During the formative years of the Chicago School much attention was devoted to critiques of supernaturalistic theologies. As a result, many of the Chicago School theologians accepted the requirement that all causal connections must be based on purely natural causes, that is, causes that could in principle be derived from or expressed in terms of the fundamental forces of physics.

It was presumably necessary at that time to fire such broad salvos. But the situation has changed both in philosophical theology and in the philosophy of science, opening up avenues for liberal theology that were closed for much of the previous century. The quickest way to see this change is to briefly consider the history of process thought and the development of emergence-based accounts of the natural world.

Process Thought

It was natural to associate Whitehead's system with the then-dominant philosophy of science, since Whitehead's work arose out of developments in fundamental physics and (until about 1920) was understood as a contribution to relativity theory. Clearly, Whitehead, Hartshorne, and their followers were committed to a metaphysics (and, in Whitehead's case, even a cosmology) that was inspired by and in deep dialogue with the best scientific theories of their day. This commitment was in contrast to Karl Barth's emphatic insistence at the opening of his *Church Dogmatics* that the standards of scientific knowledge are irrelevant for theological method. It was right to use naturalism as the rallying point for process thinkers and other liberal Christians as they sought to counterbalance the conservative and neo-orthodox thinkers in the first half of the 20th century.

By the early 1960's process thought had separated into two major schools, one theological and the other non-theistic. Those who strictly accepted the standard that all causal claims should be parsed in physical terms tended to let theism go and to concentrate on those dimensions of Whitehead's thought that did not use or require that concept. Those who retained the word "God" needed to find some way to make sense of divine influence or "lure" on actual occasions. Of course, process theologians continued to endorse Whitehead's principle that God is the "Chief Exemplification" of the metaphysical principles in *Process and Reality*. But they also insisted that God is not completely identical to a standard actual occasion (or, in Hartshorne's case, a society of

such occasions). God is aware of all the experiences of all occasions in each moment, apparently not in such a way that God's perception is limited by the parameters of a specific light cone. God is likewise able to influence all occasions at the next moment, providing an "initial aim," a differentiated lure toward greater creativity and goodness at each moment. Surely this is not the kind of causal influence that could be parsed, even in principle, in terms of the energy, matter, and fundamental laws of any conceivable physics!

David Ray Griffin has sought to express the difference by distinguishing two forms of naturalism.¹³ Naturalism_{sam} accepts the philosophies of sensationalism, atheism, and materialism, whereas naturalism_{ppp} accepts the philosophical positions of Whiteheadian prehension, panentheism, and pan-experientialism. Since almost no major physicists accept these three "P" concepts, the naturalism that Griffin has in mind is obviously a bird of a different feather from what one finds in physics-based naturalism today. By contrast, sensationalism, atheism, and materialism are often assumed (admittedly uncritically) by most working physicists. The point is not that Griffin is mistaken to attempt to stretch the term "naturalism" to encompass the causal influence of Whitehead's God. After all, physicists need not be the sole authority for defining terms, including this one. Still, it is only fair to acknowledge the great conceptual gulf between naturalism_{sam} and naturalism_{ppp}. Sometimes two distinct uses of a single term are indeed worlds apart, such that one is in fact dealing with two completely distinct philosophical concepts — even when both sides happen to use the same English word to stand for them.

Formulating the distinction allows one to see that the methods and results of the sciences do not rule out the existence of God, though in my view they do rule out certain claims about divine action.¹⁴ Why is there discord on this question? I fear that many liberal theologians are still working with assumptions motivated by a now-outdated philosophy of science. The first half of the 20th century was dominated by the schools of the Vienna Circle and logical positivism, both of which made the strongest possible claims for an eventual reduction of all scientific knowledge to the laws and forces of fundamental physics. To deny the possibility of this reduction was to render one's knowledge claims questionable, even anti-scientific, and no liberal theologian wanted to do that. The goal of positivism was paradigmatically expressed in the work of the "unity of science" movement, which hoped to unify all scientific knowledge through a series of reductions based on establishing "bridge laws" between the various scientific fields. The standard for law-based explanations was spelled out in the "covering law" model of Carl Hempel.¹⁵

But a series of “revolutions and reconstructions”¹⁶ undercut and eventually replaced what had once been the dominant orthodoxy in the philosophy of science. N. R. Hanson emphasized the role of a (Wittgensteinian) “seeing as” in science; Thomas Kuhn argued that paradigm shifts in the history of science were not controlled by shared criteria but more closely resembled religious conversions; Bas van Fraassen showed the influence of pragmatic factors on theory choice; and a wide variety of thinkers defended non- and anti-realist interpretations of science.¹⁷ These changes, taken together, make an overwhelming case against the viability of a philosophy of science based on reducing all phenomena to lower-level laws, which were supposed to govern the transition to each new scientific discipline in the resulting hierarchy.

Emergence and the “Universe Story”

For several decades after Kuhn’s groundbreaking work, philosophy of science languished in a surprising degree of epistemic skepticism and relativism. (The cultural studies interpretation of scientific practice and results can be traced back to this period.) Gradually, however, a new program in the philosophy of science began to rethink the relationship between scientific disciplines based on the notion of *emergence*. Emergence has antecedents in the British Emergentists of the 1920’s, as well as in Whitehead, but it was only with a series of new results in physics, biology, and the neurosciences that it began to take over from reduction-based interpretations of science.¹⁸ Theories of emergent complexity argue that the natural world is divided into a series of levels, that increasing complexity at one level can give rise to a new level of organization, and that empirically adequate explanations require using the explanatory categories of each new emergent level. The explosive growth of systems biology in the years following the Human Genome Project has done much to lend empirical support to this approach¹⁹, but the incompleteness of the neo-Darwinian synthesis has also played a role.²⁰

Emergentists divide sharply over the question of whether emergent levels include irreducible forms of causal activity. “Weak emergentists” deny this claim, arguing that all causes are ultimately microphysical causes and interpreting any talk of distinct causal activity above the microphysical level as purely heuristic.²¹ “Strong emergentists,” by contrast, argue that the natural world manifests new forms of causal agency at higher levels of organization, which cannot be parsed only in terms of aggregations of microphysical causes. For example, it makes no biological sense to deny that organisms do things, that they are agents in their own right.

It seems that any theological (including any process-theological) appropriation of naturalism must accept the more robust causal claims of strong emergence. For it is impossible to conceive any force of Good or any lure of God if this must be understood as merely an aggregate of the dynamics of microphysical matter and energy. If this is right, it has two immediate implications for understanding the status of liberal theology. First, liberal theology cannot be developed in the context of an exclusively reductive theory of knowledge. We do not first accept the premises of a standard physicalist account of the world and *then* look for space within this account to express our theological convictions and concerns. Rather, we challenge the assumptions of physicalism and reductionism right at the outset as a precondition for establishing the discursive space within which theological accounts can be developed, even in principle.

Second, an emergentist worldview provides a natural way to link the concerns of the theological traditions with the most up-to-date results in contemporary science and philosophy of science. The long liberal tradition of identifying the processes of nature with an overarching act of God²² opens us to seeing the macro-evolutionary picture of increasing complexity as a key feature of this natural/divine development. (For process thinkers it is even easier to link the creativity of the world's processes with the increasing richness of the divine experience.) Liberals are less likely to look for exceptions or breaks in natural law in order to salvage divine action, as for example C. S. Lewis did²³, and more likely to interpret the natural world as a continual manifestation of the nature and agency of God.

When one combines contemporary emergence theory with traditional liberal theology, a powerful alliance results. Each of the (more or less) discrete levels in cosmic evolution now allows for a both-and treatment. The initial fine-tuning of the universe, rather than supporting the pseudo-science of Intelligent Design, manifests the greater complexity of the origin (the primordial nature of God?) and suggests that the world did not begin with an absolute minimum of order. The regularities of the world revealed by physics suggest regularities in the divine nature. The agency of individual life forms, from single-celled organisms to the higher primates, and the striving of living beings to reproduce and explore their environments, although always operating within the constraints of chemistry and fundamental physics, represents a powerful analogue to the existence of finite agents within the one infinite Being. The emergence of cultural learning, of inner representations of one's environment, of conscious plans and values, and of the striving to know the meaning or ground of one's own existence — all these suggest an anthropology (or a philosophical biology²⁴) that is deeply compatible with the modern liberal traditions in theology. Finally, the open-endedness of emergence-based

cosmic evolution, and its clear compatibility with a theistic cosmology, accords nicely with classic liberal treatments of the relation between nature and the divine. The fact that the “before” and “after” of the universe are shrouded in mystery, such that no sharp deductions can be drawn to the nature of God, likewise resonates deeply with the spirit of liberalism.

In short: recent philosophy of science in general, and emergent complexity in particular, represent an unmistakable invitation to the sort of open-ended metaphysical reflection that has characterized most philosophical theology in the liberal tradition. The closeness of these results to the work of Schleiermacher is particularly remarkable. Schleiermacher was not afraid to draw on the monistic and highly physicalistic account of nature that he had found in Spinoza. Yet he added to it a strong emphasis on the role of individuals in their feeling of and striving within the world, including their quest to understand the meaning of their existence as parts within an overarching whole. Like Schleiermacher’s view, an emergence-based view of the world opens naturally onto a variety of aesthetic, ethical, and narrative concerns. It also provides a suggestive foundation for a wide range of religious experience (including experiences within non-Christian religious traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism). These parallels have been worked out impressively by thinkers such as Brian Swimme, Thomas Berry, and Karl Peters.²⁵

In light of the strong convergence between the emergence-based “universe story” and liberal philosophical theologies of the modern period, it is unfortunate that liberal thinkers today are so disinclined to engage this discussion, leaving it mostly to ecological and “new age” thinkers. Are we afraid that we would thereby fall back into a supernaturalistic and anti-scientific mind set? Hardly. Emergence points rather toward a “broad naturalism”²⁶ or, as Griffin suggests, toward naturalism_{ppp}. Yet many liberals continue to tie themselves to an account of scientific knowledge that philosophers of science, and many leading scientists, have long since abandoned. Are we afraid that paying attention to these scientific developments, and to the speculative cosmologies to which they give rise, will draw our attention away from classic liberal social concerns with race, gender, and class? But surely the powerful resurgence of neo-liberalism as a practice-oriented theoretical framework, and the vibrancy of the environmental movement, which is *not* afraid of employing a multitude of metanarratives of this type, provide evidence that fears of distraction are unnecessary.

Indeed, I suggest, *our political effectiveness will actually be undercut if we have no story to tell*. After all, telling stories (and stories about stories) is a deep feature of the human

condition; stories, especially religious stories, are some of the strongest motivators for powerful political action. In a postmodern context, the speculative theological accounts can function in this way. I might add the *realpolitische* observation that the conservatives with whom we wrestle in the United States have a vibrant narrative of their own, biblical literalism, and utilize it with extreme effectiveness for their particular political agendas.

Perhaps we have leapt too rapidly from the postmodern freedom from foundations²⁷ to the post-structuralist insistence that there are no meta-narratives, hence no constructive theology, but that all is a random play of (and on) surfaces.²⁸ Postmodernism, without the destruction of hermeneutics and semantics that post-structuralism has wrought, becomes an invitation to develop theologies that are not shy about using metaphysical terms. The resulting metaphysical accounts can be pluralistic, hypothetical, open-ended, multi-religious, and deeply tied to the dialogue with science and with multiple lived contexts and situated knowledges.²⁹

Is it just the *Term* “Liberalism” that is Problematic?

I have argued that religious liberalism — understood in the great tradition running from Schleiermacher through the sophisticated philosophical theologies of the modern period, and motivating powerful programs of action from Rauschenbush through liberation theologies and post-colonial thought — is the most powerful means for integrating the inherited Christian tradition with the major intellectual and cultural challenges of our day. Frankly, I see no alternative. A Christianity not committed (as liberalism is) to the dialogue with science, philosophy, and other religious traditions has no way of avoiding the fate of ghettoization that Peter Berger has so effectively prophesied.

But liberals, above all others, know that success is not just a matter of being right in principle; one must also be politically effective. Could it be that the term “liberalism” has been damaged beyond all reviving? At least since the beginning of the Reagan era, and increasingly through the work of the Moral Majority, Newt Gingrich, Pat Robertson, and others, this has been the explicit goal of conservatives: to fatally wound liberalism beyond all revival. Some pretty serious evidence now suggests that they just might have achieved their desired outcome. The silence of liberals during much of the last three decades, the apparent loss of nerve within the liberal camp, has left the major salvos unanswered, so that the public connotations of the term “liberal” are as negative as one could imagine. (The continued use of “economic liberalism” by Milton Friedman and his followers has not changed this fact.) I am continually amazed to find my liberal theology students certain that they are “progressives” but that they could never be liberals.

Perhaps the best way to find an answer is to subdivide the question, asking not the essentialist question of whether liberalism as such is dead, but a much more specific question: what are the contexts in which the label “liberalism” might still be effective, and what are the contexts in which it appears to be a insuperable liability?

Let’s start with the negative. In religious contexts the term “liberal” is probably *most* dead in dialogue with evangelicals. Not only conservative evangelicals, but also moderate and even relatively progressive evangelicals still define themselves in opposition to liberalism. In part liberals have brought this upon themselves, insofar as we have sometimes been wantonly destructive of everything that the Christian tradition stood for in the past; in part this hostility is a function of evangelicals defining themselves in opposition to modernist, revisionist, and, in short, liberal theological programs over the last 130 years. Those who are interested in finding common ground with evangelicals — and I deeply believe that such common ground exists and is crucially important for the success of certain liberal causes — will probably have to utilize a new term. Since the movement of “progressive evangelicals” is growing consistently stronger, thanks in part to the powerful involvement of evangelical conservationists and leaders such as Jim Wallis, it is natural to use that term for this purpose. Probably the same is true for dialogue with those who think of themselves as traditionalists or orthodox, as well as in dialogue with Russian Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox theologians and other leaders.

For direct involvement as activists in the political debates and elections of our day, probably the same is true. Here *Realpolitik* trumps all other concerns; one needs terms that will rally voters and help to create coalitions of groups with similar agendas. Without question, “progressive” does more work and brings with it fewer liabilities than “liberal.” But matters are more ambiguous when one’s goal is to find common cause with those religious groups and organizations that have a “spiritual but not religious” orientation and emphasis. Here the baggage of intra-Christian disputes is no longer an issue. In these dialogues, “liberal” is sometimes understood in the (originally intended) sense of liberality, open-mindedness, readiness to innovate and revise, and interest in cross-traditional debates. I am therefore inclined to rank the usefulness of self-identification as a liberal theologian highly for such purposes. The same applies to involvement with environmental groups, many pacifist groups, and other contexts of social concern.³⁰

What, finally, of our own tradition? That is, what of interactions with the mainline

Protestant denominations? It would be a cruel irony if for these individuals, churches, and denominations, which are in fact the living legacy of the liberal tradition, the word “liberal” had now become more of a liability than an asset.³¹ Yet that is the danger we now face. People get excited about being “progressive,” but few know much about the legacy of modern theology.

What “Liberalism” Means

The word liberalism has at least six distinct connotations. The first three, at least, are positive and worth retaining. (1) In the context of religion, the most common connotation is being open-minded and self-critical. To be “liberal” is not to be bound by creeds; to look at matters afresh; to be willing to be critical of one’s own tradition, rather than “taking it literally”; and then to revise traditional beliefs that one no longer finds credible. All of these are positive, even essential factors for contemporary religion. These factors do not yet tell us what a distinctively Christian liberal theology would be, but they are an important start.

(2) The term can also convey a set of ethical, social, and political values, many of which are associated with the history of liberalism in political theory. Liberals tend to stress, among other themes, the separation of private moral choices from government policies (e.g., the government should not interfere with reproductive choices); an active role of government in assisting the most disadvantaged and limiting profit-taking by businesses; limits on military spending in favor of other priorities; and social liberties such as gay marriage, free speech, and a strong separation of church and state. These “progressive” policies are crucial to an activist liberalism. But, again, they do not single out a liberal Christian position from other related positions.

(3) In the 20th century “liberal theology” gradually came to be synonymous with “modern theology.” It came to mean a mode of reflecting on inherited Christian content that takes distinctively modern developments and ways of thinking — modern social and political beliefs, the themes and conclusions of modern philosophy, scientific challenges to traditional doctrines (e.g., to divine action claims), and religious pluralism — with utmost seriousness and that is willing to make some changes to what one affirms as a result. In this sense, liberalism is both the concern with these modern challenges *and* the set of constructive responses that Christian theologians have made to them. Obviously this would include the constructive moves made by Schleiermacher, who is called “the father of liberal theology” (even though the phrase “liberal theology” did not come into use until around 1900). But it would also include the whole range of constructive

philosophical theologies that have been developed since the Reformation.

But “liberal” has other, more negative connotations, which do not need to be, and in my view should not be, retained by Christian liberals. (4) The program of “economic liberalism” associated with Milton Friedman defends laissez-faire capitalism, arguing that minimal government regulation of markets is the best means for creating social and political freedom. Though Friedman believed his economic theories were rooted in political liberalism, they became the core of conservative economic policy in the U.S. and overseas, especially in the 1980s. Economic liberalism should be sharply distinguished from “liberal theology,” which I believe entails an approach to economics that stands closer to the work of Cobb and Daly.³²

(5) “Liberal” is sometimes taken to mean “opposed in principle to all traditional belief.” Christian liberals in this sense are those who reject (or actively seek to destroy!) scripture and tradition. But there is no reason to equate liberalism with an inherently destructive attitude or with the premise that little to nothing can be saved from the tradition. One can equally well seek to retain as much as possible of traditional belief, revising doctrines only where direct conflicts with science or reason arise. Finally, (6) it is sometimes said that “liberals” are those who are disinterested in all questions of religious truth and care only for advocating some set of social and political programs. This connotation should be eschewed. Modern theology has been *deeply* motivated by the quest to know what is true in the Christian scriptures and tradition. It is a bastardization of the liberal program to associate it with the view that all Christian language is merely metaphorical or just obviously false, and that the only interest of such language lies in its relevance for this or that particular form of political theory or social activism.

Five Core Tenets of Liberal Theologies

I maintain that a liberal Christian position, in the sense just defined, is worth fighting for. The key features of the liberal heritage, taken together, offer a viable and powerful form of religious response for the contemporary world. Overcoming the crisis in liberal religious thought requires rediscovering the significance of these core contributions of the liberal tradition.

(1) *Striving toward integration.* The priorities and tasks of classical liberal thought remain equally vital today; its goals have not yet been achieved. If there is to be a renaissance of liberal religious thought, liberals will need to return to and to study afresh the classic texts of our heritage, those of Schleiermacher and Ritschl and Troelsch, of

Rauschenbush and Bonhoeffer and Tillich. The need for theologies of integration at the beginning of the 21st century is greater than ever, since there are a variety of new forms of integration that demand our attention today. Consider the fertile fields for integration in our present context:

- multiple religious traditions;
- diverse cultural traditions;
- science and religion;
- complicated ethical questions, from bioethics to new forms of human relationship;
- the continuing struggle to integrate faith and politics;
- the new opportunities for constructive dialogue between liberals and evangelicals within the one church catholic;
- and the “lived integration” of our corporate beliefs with our corporate practice (putting one’s life choices where one’s mouth is).

As Peter Berger writes, “The old agenda of liberal theology was the contestation with modernity.... The much more pressing agenda today is the contestation with the fullness of human religious possibilities.”³³ Today one thinks and lives as a Christian, or chooses not to affirm this tradition, against a rich tapestry of variegated religious options, in a way that wasn’t true for most Americans a few decades ago.

(2) *Religious “location” in a pluralistic world.* The quest for broad integration rather than boundary drawing is more than just an intellectual endeavor; it is a mode of being in the world. I call it *critical faith*.

One of the great strengths of the liberal tradition has been its awareness of the actual complexity of religious believing in the modern (and now postmodern) world. Christians today do not live in the first century, nor in a “Christendom” dominated by a single religion, nor in an age when it is obvious that all thinking persons have (or should have) any religious belief at all. Never has a wider range of choices been available to men and women than today. The liberal tradition was born out of the need to formulate Christian responses adequate to the demands of this new modern situation. Only a form of faith that recognizes and internalizes these complexities has a chance of finding sufficiently nuanced constructive responses to today’s challenges.

The critics of liberalism sometimes charge that liberals have no religious location of their own. They imply that “liberal faith” is a contradiction in terms. We should resist this charge as strongly as possible. I have sought to show that the mainline churches are the heirs to a long and proud tradition of integration, of moral and religious conviction.

It is our heritage as liberal Christians to believe as deeply and passionately as our more conservative brethren.

But a critical faith adds self-awareness and honesty to religious passion. We are fallible. The arguments for our beliefs, like all matters religious, are not black and white but rather complex and subtle. Religious beliefs evolve over time and reflect the influence of the believer's cultural and historical location. Strength of conviction is not by itself a proof of truth. It is a core feature of liberal faith to combine deep and abiding religious convictions with a continuing awareness of the *fallibility* of all human agents. Practicing this complex balancing act is a powerful antidote to religious dogmatism and intolerance.

(3) *Liberal or "progressive" political agendas.* One of the urgent reasons for mainline denominations to speak with a unified liberal voice is to increase our effectiveness in forwarding progressive political agendas, which we believe is mandated by the biblical concern for the poor and oppressed. The content of that call is well known and does not need to be repeated here. One should note, however, that succeeding in this urgent task requires not only that we strengthen our calls to action and the grounds we give for these political stances; it also requires new forms of association. These begin with interdenominational alliances such as Progressive Christians Uniting.³⁴ But the alliances must also cross religious lines, as in the work of the Network of Spiritual Progressives, co-founded by Michael Lerner and associated with the journal *Tikkun*.³⁵ It is equally important to join forces with progressive evangelicals where we have common cause.

(4) *Synthesis with philosophy.* In the case of liberal Christian thought, dispensing with philosophical theology is not a viable option. To quote scriptures alone, as if, by themselves and uninterpreted, they could tell us all we need to know about God, is no longer sufficient. Nor will it suffice to develop a primarily creedal theology, as if the theologian's only task were to update the language of classic Christian creeds, understood as normatively binding. Liberal theologians accept the obligation of showing why and how biblical and creedal language is plausible in today's context; where that plausibility cannot be shown, they are likely to seek more adequate language. The sources of the conceptual systems to which liberals appeal may be classic Christian thinkers (Augustine, Aquinas); they may be ancient philosophical systems (Plato, Aristotle, pre-Socratic thinkers); they may be great philosophical systems from the modern era (Spinoza, Hegel, Whitehead); or one may appeal to analytic arguments, as in contemporary philosophy of religion.

(5) *Classical Christian topics or “loci.”* The section on defining liberalism above made clear that liberal theologians are not required to eschew all Christian content. As long as the biblical texts and creeds are not used in a foundationalist fashion, held as authoritative and beyond all questioning, there is no reason why the “horizon” of the biblical texts and theological tradition cannot remain an important focus of the inquiry. The recent tendency to presuppose that all Christian language *could* not be more than metaphorical — false as it stands, but useful for certain purposes — is surely foreign to the spirit of liberalism. Alasdair MacIntyre has shown that traditions have a certain integrity of their own.³⁶ This lends them a kind of inertia; one cannot make them into just anything without their ceasing to be the traditions they are. One can endorse this truth in a fully liberal spirit and thus without any incipient fundamentalism; it is precisely as *liberals* that we set our particular tradition into dialogue with the best scientific, philosophical, and comparative-religions work of our day. We are not out to preserve our tradition at all costs, but nor is it our calling to be gleeful destroyers of the tradition either.

A non-dogmatic use of the classical *loci* of Christian theology can be especially useful here. The *loci* of Melancthon or the Protestant Scholastics do not need to be taken as the final answers on all Christian topics. But the *loci* continue to serve admirably as a list of the Christian *questions*. For something to pass as a Christian theology, liberal or otherwise, is for it to address a set of questions that, in one form or another, have preoccupied Christian thinkers since the beginning. As a Christian theologian I do not need to affirm an eternal, pre-incarnation Logos. But I do need to provide some answer to the question, Who was the one they called Jesus Christ? Likewise, I need to say what is Spirit, how is God present to the world, and what is the Christian hope. In answering these questions, I will find myself writing a doctrine of God, the God-world relation, creation, anthropology, Christology, pneumatology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. This does not mean that we are tied to all the traditional distinctions, and definitely not to all the traditional answers. But it does place on us a sort of obligation: if we think that some classic area of debate (say, the doctrine of salvation) is no longer relevant in any form, then the onus is on us to show *why* it is no longer relevant.

Conclusion: Toward a Renewed Theology of Integration

We began with the demographics of the mainline churches today. Never before has the liberal wing of the church, including its main educational and activist institutions, faced a crisis of this severity. There is no need to abandon liberal theology; in fact, the need for it is greater than ever. But given the steady decline in mainline church membership, we

simply cannot go it alone as Presbyterians, Methodists, and Episcopalians. We have emerged from a common tradition, and we stand for a common set of concerns both theological and political.

The task for liberals today, Peter Berger argues, is to learn to “hold convictions without either dissolving them in utter relativity or encasing them in the false absolutes of fanaticism.”³⁷ American religion too often contents itself with one of two escape routes: the embrace of a false certainty, happily marketed by various orthodoxies, or the certainty that there *is* no access to truth, resulting in nihilism and utter relativism.³⁸ But we sell liberalism short when we match conservative extremes with equal extremes of our own. As we confront the pluralism of modern societies, Berger argues, we must “steer a course between a limitless tolerance which passively and yet ‘progressively’ reads the signs of the current age but surrenders to it with ‘nothing to say,’ on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a conservative fanaticism that denies the current age by writing about it ‘without having ever listened’ to it.”³⁹

One cannot be certain that the mainline churches and their institutions will survive in anything like their current form. (Of course, some liberal Christian voices will remain as long as there is a Christian religion.) But one *can* formulate the decision that the mainline churches and their theologians face today. *If we wish our societal presence and influence to be political only*, then we should abandon “liberal” and become “progressive” in name, spirit, and activism. To choose that route, however, is in my view to choose the eventual demise of the mainline as a viable *religious* option for Americans. By contrast, *if we want our Christian identity to be distinctive in some way, and if we wish to ground our personal, societal, and political and involvement in the Christian story*, then the sort of liberalism I have defended here still does indispensable duty. To choose this second option does not guarantee the survival of the historically liberal Protestant denominations. But it is the only chance we have.

The decision between these two options has everything to do with the tradition of integration discussed above: the speculative-experiential-ethical-political tradition that grew out of the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher and other 19th-century theologians. Of course, if one is convinced that the tradition of modern theology is dead, or that it has been superseded by post-structuralism or post-colonialism or a set of specific views on matters of race, gender, and class, then one “has no need of that hypothesis.” But if one is convinced, as I am, that the message of Jesus and the theological traditions issuing forth from him link more naturally to progressive than to conservative agendas, and if one believes, as I also do, that these progressive agendas cannot survive and flourish in

the long run without being grounded in the biblical and theological tradition, then one has no alternative. We *must* fight for the survival and renewal of the liberal theological traditions.

I must emphasize in closing that *how* one endorses and proclaims these premises matters. To be effective, they will require more than foot-dragging discouragement and uncertainty. For whatever reasons, we live in an age in which many liberal theologians speak in hushed tones, and in some cases only in private, whereas in public they prefer to present themselves as religious studies scholars (or political theorists or philosophers). I find this shyness puzzling. No other branch of Christian theology is as prepared by its background to enter into effective dialogue with contemporary science, philosophy, and culture, because liberalism is the only branch of theology that is *defined* in terms of the dialogue between the inherited tradition and the contemporary world. It is our heritage as liberal Christian thinkers not to be bound to past formulations when there are compelling reasons to revise or replace them. Yet nor are we required to shy away from the word “God” altogether, to stand completely outside the tradition of Christian language, or to regard it only as a collection of useful fictions.

In short, overcoming the current crisis in liberal theology will not be a matter of holding correct beliefs alone. It will *also* require rekindling our own strength of conviction about the urgency of the liberal, integrationist perspective. It will take a willingness to formulate our beliefs clearly — not only political and ethical beliefs, but also theological truth claims — and the willingness to stand up for them in the public sphere. We cannot claim for ourselves epistemic certainty, inerrant authority, or exclusive rights for our various formulations; they will always remain a matter of family resemblances among multiple views rather than strict adherence to a single creed. But the postmodern context in which we live and work allows for passionate commitment to a vibrant faith that is *semper reformans* — always reforming, always in process — even when foundational certainty is lacking.

Will we claim this heritage?⁴⁰

Endnotes

¹ Peter Berger, *Questions of Faith: A Skeptical Affirmations of Christianity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), viii, emphasis added.

² “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2008), 5. The following references are to this same document.

³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁵ See Fred Marchant, *Tipping Point* (Washington, DC: Word Works, 1993); Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 2002).

⁶ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 306. The following references in the text are to the same book.

⁷ Dawkins, *God Delusion*, 308.

⁸ Dawkins, *God Delusion*, 36.

⁹ Of course, the silence has not been complete. One excellent liberal response is *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens* by John F. Haught (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008). See also Clayton, *Beyond the Religion Wars: The Path from Reduction to Reenchantment* (in preparation).

¹⁰ See Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin* (Notre-Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

¹¹ It is interesting that mainline pastors are now attending conferences on the “emerging church” and training sessions of the Network of Spiritual Progressives (on which more below) in the search for vibrant community.

¹² Peter L. Berger, *A Far Glory: The Quest for Faith in an Age of Credulity* (New York: Anchor Books, 1992).

¹³ See David Ray Griffin, *Two Great Truths: A New Synthesis of Scientific Naturalism and Christian Faith* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004); Griffin, “Panentheism: A Postmodern Revelation,” in Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke, *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections for a Scientific World* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2004).

¹⁴ See Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); Clayton and Steven Knapp, “Divine Action and the ‘Argument from Neglect’,” in Robert J. Russell and Nancey Murphy, *Physics and Cosmology: Scientific Perspectives on the Problem of Natural Evil* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), 179-94. The problem of evil plays an essential role in the argument.

¹⁵ I summarize this movement in the “formal” part of chapter two in *Explanation From Physics to Theology: An Essay in Rationality and Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

¹⁶ See Mary Hesse, *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980).

¹⁷ Clayton, *Explanation*, chapter 2.

¹⁸ Philip Clayton and Paul Davies, eds., *The Re-Emergence of Emergence* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁹ Clayton, “Hierarchies: The Core Argument for a Naturalistic Christian Faith,” *Zygon* 43 (2008): 25-39

²⁰ John B. Cobb, Jr., ed., *Back to Darwin: A Richer Account of Evolution* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2008).

²¹ Carl Gillett, “The Hidden Battles Over Emergence,” in Clayton, ed., *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006): 801-18.

²² See e.g. Maurice Wiles, *God’s Action in the World*, the 1986 Bampton lectures (London: SCM Press, 1986); Gordon Kaufman, *In the Beginning — Creativity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

²³ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1974 [1947]).

²⁴ E.g., Leon R. Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science: Biology and Human Affairs* (New York: Free Press, 1985).

²⁵ See Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era — A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSan Francisco, 1992), and Karl Peters, *Dancing With the Sacred: Evolution, Ecology, and God* (Harrisburg, Pa: Trinity Press International, 2002).

²⁶ Mario De Caro and David Macarthur, eds., *Naturalism in Question* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

²⁷ J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).

²⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). For a good example of this unwarranted leap, see Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 2001); Cupitt, *Radical Theology: Selected Essays* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2006).

²⁹ Clayton, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), especially chapter one, "Toward a Pluralistic Theology."

³⁰ Yet even here matters are a bit ambiguous. Some unwelcome connotations from the defeat of liberalism in the political sphere over the last three decades can rise up to haunt those who self-identify as liberal theologians in these debates. "Progressive" sounds so, well, progressive, whereas "liberal" brings with it connotations that are, perhaps ironically, old and traditionalist. There are cases where it just doesn't seem worth the work to define and make the case for identifying one's religious location as "liberal theology."

³¹ Part of the reason is that the authors being discussed by mainline Christians today, people like John Shelby Spong and Marcus Borg, do not self-identify as liberals.

³² Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, Jr., *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994); John B. Cobb, Jr., *Sustaining the Common Good: A Christian Perspective on the Global Economy* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1994).

³³ Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/ Doubleday, 1979), 183.

³⁴ See <www.progressivechristiansuniting.org>, verified March 6, 2008.

³⁵ The group adheres to four basic tenets: "foster a New Bottom Line of love, generosity & ecological sensitivity in our economy, education, media, & government; foster a new global consciousness and solidarity; promote awe, radical amazement, gratitude & developing an inner spiritual life; and challenge the misuse of God & religion by the Religious Right and religio-phobia on the Left" <<http://www.spiritualprogressives.org/>>. For example, the Network of Spiritual Progressives advances a "Global Marshall Plan." This is "a public policy proposal for bringing about a safe, sustainable, compassionate world by working together as a community of nations to [1] completely eliminate poverty once and for all [and 2] solve the environmental crisis that threatens the existence of life on the planet." Specifically:

We propose that the United States lead the G8 nations in dedicating 1-2% of our gross domestic product every year for the next ten years to these goals. Funds would be administered through a nongovernmental body convened explicitly for this purpose, and all funded programs will be [1] environmentally and ethically sustainable; [2] respectful of native cultures and empowering of local people; [and 3] designed to embody and foster love, caring, kindness, generosity, nonviolence, ethical and environmental sensitivity, and the ability to respond to the universe with awe and wonder <<http://www.spiritualprogressives.org/article.php?story=20070228183252814>>.

³⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007); MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

³⁷ Peter Berger, *A Far Glory*, 46.

³⁸ Berger, *A Far Glory*, 18-19.

³⁹ Tino Garcia, personal communication, modified, quoting Berger, *A Far Glory*, 15-6.

⁴⁰ I am grateful to John Cobb, Jr., Steven Knapp, and Kate Clayton for conversations that have contributed significantly to the position and argument developed here.