Modern Intellectual History, 8, 2 (2011), pp. 457–470 © Cambridge University Press 2011
doi:10.1017/S1479244311000278

READING LIBERAL THEOLOGY

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Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805–1900* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001)
Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900–1950* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003)
Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, and Postmodernity, 1950–2005* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006)

Gary Dorrien has presented to all who have an interest in religion, and religious ideas especially, a magnificent piece of scholarship. These three volumes on liberal theology in the United States have value in the massive amount of writings they bring under study and into the mainstream of American intellectual history. To that extent they address a historiographical gap; conservative thinking in the long evangelical tradition down to the contemporary "religious right" has received greater attention.[1] Liberal theology, as Dorrien treats it, interconnects with a wide range of ideas—in philosophy, science, and history most importantly, and other topical maters like feminism and race. This trilogy should attract the attention of intellectual historians not only for its rich content but also for the suggestions it has for this discipline itself; that is, for practicing intellectual history and recognizing some of the contrasting approaches to its subject matter.

At the outset, one point, however mundane, deserves mention: these books are very large. The shortest of the three, the first, has 410 pages of text in (regrettably) very small print; the largest, the second, has 566 pages. Ample endnotes add more length, and much value, to these monographs. Form affects substance in this instance. His publishers give Dorrien a license to range expansively in narrating a history that dates from the early nineteenth century with Unitarianism and carries into the twenty-first century and postmodernism. He seizes that opportunity and supplements his discussions of changing ideas in American theology with an

[1] On the significance of liberal theology see the review essay by David A. Hollinger in the inaugural issue of this journal. He discusses four recent books about American religion. "Jesus Matters in the USA," *Modern Intellectual History* 1 (2004), 135–49.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244311000278 Published online by Cambridge University Press

abundance of biographical material. Life histories give a location to the ideas and provide them with associations of often remarkable personalities. This "narrative approach with a strong biographical dimension that allows each thinker to speak in his or her own voice" (*1805–1900*, xxiv), as Dorrien puts it, serves this study well.

Thus we learn that William Ellery Channing, leading theological voice of the early nineteenth-century Unitarians, had a troubled youth. Hellfire sermons, with their lurid depictions, unsettled him. The contradictions, in his own family, of devotion to liberty and tolerance of slavery, made him uneasy. He retreated to the seaside for many hours of a day, removed from family and friends. As a student at Harvard, Channing experienced a profound uneasiness, both at the fashionable vogue for French radicalism among the students and at the troubling implications he saw in the empirical epistemology of John Locke. Discovering the Scottish philosophers, Francis Hutcheson and Thomas Reid especially, assured Channing of a positive moral sense in all human beings and of a spiritual realm of being differentiated from material reality. Channing felt delivered from an intellectual crisis and brought into a "new spiritual birth," as he described it. Furthermore, he now had the building blocks—a dualist idea of reality and a religion rooted in morality—for the Unitarian system he would defend the rest of his life.

Or, from the second volume, consider two other cases. Walter Rauschenbusch attended the Baptist Seminary in Rochester where his father, the domineering August, taught a version of Calvinist scholasticism in the 1880s and where orthodoxy generally reigned. Rauschenbusch discovered the early expressions of social Christianity in Washington Gladden, Richard T. Ely, and Josiah Strong. He also found in Horace Bushnell a liberal theology morally inspiring and rationally persuasive. But Rauschenbusch had no idea how the pastoral career to which he aspired would accommodate such ideas, especially among the conservative German American Baptists of his family's identity. After a term of service in Louisville, Rauschenbusch found himself in New York City, a knife's throw from Hell's Kitchen and the Tenderloin district. Gangs, gambling, and prostitution flourished here. Rauschenbusch's church building, "ugly, run-down, and depressing, like its neighborhood," Dorrien reports, (*1900–1950*, 80) served a congregation of mostly German immigrant laborers. But Rauschenbusch took heart and resolved to live in the same conditions as his parishioners and strive to bring them the promise of Jesus' salvation. It took no little courage to maintain his commitment while all the while he suffered from the progressive loss of his hearing. Rauschenbusch had as yet no theology of the Social Gospel nor of the Kingdom theme that would mark his major contribution to theological liberalism. He had before his eyes, however, the stark vision of a world to which, above all, that growing understanding would speak.

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By comparison, Rauschenbusch's ally in the Social Gospel, Vida Scudder, came to the movement from a much different path. She urged a social reconstruction informed by Marxism and inspired by the social cohesiveness she found in High Church Anglicanism and Catholicism; the individualism of liberal Protestantism would never suffice to effect massive social change, she insisted. But until she left the United States to attend Oxford University in 1884 her Christianity had mostly an aesthetic recommendation for her. At Oxford, though, she encountered John Ruskin in his late turn to socialism. She later wrote, "Something within me stirred, responded, awoke" (*1900–1950*, 130). She vowed to give the rest of her life to the needs of the poor, and did.

And finally, an illustration from the third volume. Langdon Gilkey grew up in Chicago's Hyde Park area where his father, the well-known Charles Gilkey, pastored its prestigious Baptist church and where his mother enjoyed a wide recognition for her feminist views. Gilkey forsook for a while the religiosity of his parents but maintained their social idealism. At Harvard he embraced ethical humanism. In Europe in 1939 (with the Harvard tennis team), he barely escaped the Nazi invasion. For a while, however, the war meant little to him. His vehement antiwar feelings led him to view indifferently the fate of those who fell to Hitler's aggression and he maintained a cynical detachment from the conflict. His father, however, had become a close friend of Reinhold Niebuhr and had succumbed gradually to Niebuhr's searing critique of liberal religion and the bourgeois sentimentalism that he believed underscored its Social Gospel correlative. So one day, Charles, now vexed at his son's naive pacifism, said to Langdon, "go hear Reinie preach sometime." When Niebuhr visited Harvard, Gilkey did just that. The sermon sent him reeling. Niebuhr tore apart Gilkey's ethical humanism and instructed him in moral ambiguity. It was a conversion experience. "Suddenly," Gilkey later wrote, "as the torrent of insight poured from the pulpit, my world in disarray spun completely around, steadied, and then settled into a new and quite firm and intelligible structure" (*1950–2005*, 272). Gilkey heard Niebuhr preach twice more during the Harvard engagement and then read all his works. He spent the war years as a prisoner in China where he had joined a Presbyterian missionary group. The experience confirmed him in neo-orthodoxy, the next chapter in his varying intellectual career.

Biography always enriches intellectual history. To be sure, Dorrien never overdetermines his subject. Personal experiences and the influence of family, class, education, and geography shape the life and thought of individuals but do not deprive them of autonomy. And it would be wrong to associate Christian liberalism with only the more cerebral approaches to religion and assign to the evangelical wing its greater emotive force. Liberal biography documents aplenty the transforming experiences that shape whole careers.

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However much it provides some location for the origin and reception of ideas, though, this history requires more in order to explain their dissemination. Dorrien supplies a second focus for his study by the considerable attention he gives to the institutional location of liberal theology. Here the narrative moves from the pulpits in the early nineteenth century to the divinity schools and theological seminaries in the twentieth. The great figures of the first era were churchmen—Channing, Theodore Parker, Bushnell, Henry Ward Beecher, Lyman Abbott, Washington Gladden. To be sure, the divinity schools of the early and mid-nineteenth century had critical roles in marking the parameters of American Protestantism. Harvard made its move to Unitarianism in 1805 and rival, orthodox Andover Theological Seminary rose to combat that influence three years later. Yale played an important part in moderating Calvinist orthodoxy under the system formulated by Nathaniel William Taylor, and Princeton Theological Seminary remained throughout the citadel of Calvinism in the United States. For Dorrien's purposes, three schools have special significance as houses of the liberal Protestantism of the twentieth century, in all its intriguing varieties: the University of Chicago Divinity School, Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and Boston University (later School of Theology).

One case from the Boston experience demonstrates the value of the institutional focus. Boston philosopher Borden Parker Bowne introduced one of liberal theology's most important forms, personalism. Bowne came from a family of devout Methodists and grew up in New Jersey. He graduated from New York University in 1873 and then studied in Europe, most significantly with Hermann Ulrici at Halle and Rudolph Hermann Lotze at Göttingen. Bowne's early career thus exemplifies the crucial role played by Germany in shaping American religious thought. From Kant to Friedrich Schleiermacher, to David Strauss, to Albrecht Ritschl, and many others, German thinkers influenced the shaping of liberal theology through its first stage. To the religious conservatives they constituted the "German infection" and this group resisted the intrusion in every way it could. For himself, Bowne followed Kant to a point, but judged him insufficient for the interests of true religious understanding. Kant, he believed, in restricting knowledge to phenomena, shut off human knowledge of God, while Bowne believed that reason embraces a positive notion of a transcendent spiritual reality. Drawing on forms of philosophical idealism, Bowne attributed personality to all that is real. From that basis, in his book *Theory of Thought and Knowledge* (1897), Bowne resisted all mechanistic interpretations of life and kept up the attack in the many books that mark his prolific scholarship. Bowne saw purpose and direction in life as assured by a guide whose nature all humans share. From this understanding Bowne issued a statement of liberal Protestantism's view of life: "The central thing," he wrote,

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is the recognition of the divine will in all life, and, the loyal, loving effort to make that will prevail in all life: first of all in the hidden life of the spirit, and then in family life, in social life, in political life, in trade, in art, in literature, in every field of human interest and activity. (*1805–1900*, 390)

Well into the next century, Boston divinity stood for personalist theology. Dorrien gives much attention to Albert C. Knudson, Francis J. McConnell, and Edgar S. Brightman in the second book, and to Harold DeWolf and S. Paul Schilling in the third. Boston personalism made a historic impact through its association with Martin Luther King Jr. King's father, worried that his son's roots in the southern Baptist tradition were eroding, did not encourage his interest in studying for the doctoral degree at Boston. The young Baptist wanted to study with Brightman, though, and he joined a flow of black students to BU in the 1950s. He took a course on the philosophy of religion from Brightman and three others from DeWolf. He emerged from Boston thoroughly instructed in personalist theology and quickly found in it a motivation and inspiration for his leadership in the civil rights movement. "This personal idealism," he wrote in his autobiography,

remains today my basic philosophical position. Personalism's insistence that only personality—finite and infinite—is ultimately real strengthened me in two convictions: it gave me metaphysical and philosophical grounding for the idea of a personal God, and it gave me a metaphysical basis for the dignity and worth of all human personality. (*1950–2005*, 154)

King brought Christian judgment against racial segregation as above all a degradation of personhood.

Conventional wisdom would probably, as in the case of King, associate liberal theology with liberal or progressive politics and reformist social attitudes. Today, conservative or "fundamentalist" religion evokes the Religious Right. But liberal religion has not always embraced progressive social ideas. The Unitarians, with their large presence in the Boston area, feared the possible extensions of the French Revolution to America, allied themselves with the Federalist Party, and, in sizeable number, recoiled from the anti-slavery feelings of Channing and Parker. Channing himself had no love for William Lloyd Garrison and his rabble ilk among the abolitionists. Bushnell, whom Dorrien calls "the theological father of mainstream American liberal Protestantism" (*1805–1900*, 111), believed, even as he labeled slavery a crime, that blacks represented an inferior civilization and posed an obstacle to American progress. Jews, Indians, Catholics, and the Celtic Irish also faired poorly in Bushnell's racial and religious assessments. Furthermore, this Hartford theologian, who inspired so many in the liberal theological movement, had nothing good to say about women's emancipation. Women, he believed, should assist men, not compete with them. He saw only corruption of the essential

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female nature should women enter into the arenas of American public life. Lyman Abbott, as late as 1903, supported southerners' denying blacks the suffrage. Anglo-Saxonism prevails thematically in Josiah Strong's *Our Country* and informatively in much of early liberalism. Rauschenbusch intimated a Teutonic–Anglo alliance in the United States, these views emerging amid his concern for declining German representation in the changing ethnic makeup of immigration to America. Rauschenbusch also feared that feminism threatened family values. Much of this record, however unprogressive, shows how much the American liberals reflected dominant opinion in their own time and place. Dorrien writes, "Liberal theology was a product of middle-class anxiety and privilege, it was easily drafted for nationalistic causes, and it gave the sanction of progressive Christian reason to racial and sexual discrimination" (*1805–1900*, 409).

Dorrien pretty much leaves the matter at that, and wisely so. He avoids reductionism by a too-close juxtaposition of the social location of liberal theology and its intellectual content. So the third category of inquiry respecting this subject concerns liberal theology as an intellectual movement, a forum of ideas. What does this liberalism say about God, human nature, the means of salvation, the authority of Scripture, morality and the Christian life, dogma, church? Of course, these three volumes show that liberal religious thought was the stuff of infinite variety. One moves a long way, for example, from a Theodore Parker in the nineteenth century to a Henry Nelson Wieman in the twentieth. In the one we see absolute confidence in an intuition that connects us to a divine indwelling, the vehicle of an "absolute religion" whose "Temple is all space." In the other we hear the demands for religion rigorously rational and empirical, intolerant of any idealism, and acceptable only by the standards of modern scientific method. Wieman eventually judged it futile to search for infinite being that transcended existence. So Dorrien plays it safe, shunning any precise intellectual formulation of liberalism. He does, however, give liberal theology a descriptive normality by placing it always as a middle ground, a "third way" between orthodoxy on the one hand and materialism or secularism on the other. At any of the eras under study, liberalism reacted to save religion and a rational defense of spirituality from the new currents of thought or the new components of modern culture that appeared threatening. In this effort it looked to the natural and social sciences especially, but personal experience, too, had for many liberal religionists a validating base for theology. The liberals would adapt, borrow, reformulate, refine, or accommodate as needed, as they made their way into new understandings of the faith. Here one recognizes the "mediationist character" of liberalism. For a major obstacle to religion's well-being, liberals believed, came also from religion itself. Conservatism, in the form of dogma and creed, biblical literalism, and often a visceral disdain for modernity itself, always threatened to lock religion into obsolescence, liberals

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asserted. Such an awareness, however, often blinded liberals to threats of their own making.

In the first era one matter above all challenged the liberals. They confronted in the rationalism and materialism of the Enlightenment a universe of mechanical law and material fact. And however much the Scottish Common Sense thinkers, who dominated American academic philosophy well into the nineteenth century, preserved a base for religion by their stark ontological dualism of mind and matter, spirit and nature, the liberals grew restless with this static dichotomy. Kant's "Copernican revolution" and the course of German philosophy afterwards had much promise for the liberal Americans. These new intellectual currents inspired liberalism's first great effort: to break down the barriers of the material and the spiritual worlds, the natural and the supernatural. Emerson and the Transcendentalists led the way and Dorrien offers a lengthy and informative discussion of Parker as the emblematic voice in the movement. Horace Bushnell, however, stands out even more as a transformational thinker in American Christianity. He had gained much public attention with his *Christian Nurture* in 1847, but many consider his *Nature and the Supernatural* (1858) of even greater significance. Dorrien describes the treatise as "a sprawling, discursive, apologetic case for his picture of the world as the medium of divine and human self-communication" (*1805–1900*, 158). Bushnell knew his audience, those middle classes fearful of the ascendent materialism in modern intellectual currents but uninterested in combating them by older theologies. Bushnell strove to show that the natural and supernatural are the complementary vehicles of divine activity in the world. Such an effort to dispel middle-class doubt also describes the work, and the great appeal, of Henry Ward Beecher, a figure of national renown, and himself influenced by Bushnell. Beecher pursued the project under the auspices of evolutionary thought.

Evolution became the master concept of liberal theology in the late nineteenth century. It enabled the liberals to embrace the "essential" truths of science and bring their theology into accord with modern thought. They could maintain a loyalty to Scripture, while seeing it not as a historical document frozen forever in a past time, but as the first record of God's progressive manifestation and disclosure to the human mind over time. The liberals read evolution as a manifesto of progress, the work of the cooperating activities of God and humanity. Evolution demonstrated to them the unity of all creation and God's role in guiding the advancement of the human race. "One thing comes from another," wrote Theodore Munger, "assumes a higher and finer form, and presses steadily on towards still higher and finer forms" (*1805–1900*, 299). Many liberals embraced a theology of immanence, of God's progressive immersion in human history. Now liberal theology became emphatically teleological. And herein lay the challenge to Christians: to join in and advance God's expanding activity in the world, to

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embrace its mission of justice and moral improvement, yes, even to save the cities and improve the lot of working people. Out of evolutionary theology came the Social Gospel of the early twentieth century, embraced by most voices of this "new theology."

But just how far were the liberal theologians prepared to go in merging the natural and the supernatural? In fact, they had started to move in a direction from which they knew not how to stop, or indeed often had no desire to stop. In his introduction to the second volume Dorrien writes that the next generation of liberals created standards for a theology heavily naturalistic and empirical in nature. Several hundred pages follow that illustrate the many manifestations of the new criteria and before long a reader might begin to wonder just what is going on in American theology. What is left of God or the spiritual, or the soul, or higher moral truth, or universal authority of any kind in religion?

The Chicago thinkers had the major role here. They maintained that a huge chasm separates the modern world, its mind and culture, from the biblical world. The modern mind could not have invented the Trinity. The new liberals embraced evolutionary thinking as incorporated by the American pragmatic philosophers—Peirce, James, and Dewey. They located religion and religious values in mental habits and confined their meaning to measurable experiences. Theology, many of them believed, would have to use the standards of science. An early leader at Chicago, and always a controversial figure, George Burman Foster, denounced all "authority religion" and, in Darwinian and Hegelian prescriptions, recognized no permanent or substantive realities as legitimate for religion. The divine reality is a process of becoming, Foster believed, a work in progress, so to speak. The soul, Foster maintained, is not a substance either, but "a passing moment in the dialectic process of reality, a fleeting thought of the Thought" (*1900–1950*, 165). Ponder this.

Shailer Mathews, a major figure in Chicago liberalism, also highlighted the temporal divisions that made early Christianity so distant to modern consciousness. Early in his career, Mathews wrote that theology must reinterpret the primitive elements of Christianity in modern terms, removed from an ancient and abandoned cosmology. He looked for a religion of measurable use, that is, in effecting social change. Simple morality could not inspire the power needed for this change, but Christianity, in its devotion to the historical Jesus, did have regenerative consequences for the individual and for society. Mathews thus for a while preserved an evangelical ingredient in his liberalism (not alone among the liberals in doing so), but in his later writings a dominant naturalism emerged. He demanded now that "the use of the methods of modern science" prevail in deriving (as opposed to confirming) religious truths. How do they serve "the needs of living persons?" he would ask. Mathews dissociated religion from any dogma, and sanctioned beliefs only to the extent that they served a contemporary

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purpose. By the mid-1920s he had turned to social psychology as theology's academic partner. It supplied, in the idea of personality, the divine–human nexus, so that he could conclude that "there must be personality-evolving activities in the cosmos . . . That is the law of life itself" (*1900–1950*, 206, 211). But in fact it was becoming difficult to discern in Mathews where the natural and the supernatural stood apart.

Ambiguity did not describe Edward Scribner Ames at Chicago. Empiricism, the only valid standard in modernity, "attaches no validity to the old dualism of the natural and supernatural, the human and the divine," he avowed. We cannot see ourselves as connected to the divinity of Christ, he wrote, only to his goodness and worth. Ames believed he spoke for "all who truly dwell in this new world of the natural and the social sciences" and who seek to establish "the new orthodoxy" built on them (*1900–1950*, 232, 233). Well, one can site many indices of this brand of religious modernism. Douglas Clyde Macintosh wanted an even more refined and precise empirical theology, built strictly on "verified theological material" (*1900–1950*, 246). That material signified for him religious experience, expansively defined and having nothing to do with the nature of God or even the existence of God. Wieman in turn reinforced Chicago's diminution of the deity and urged that theology become as scientific as possible. Defining religion strictly by its moral content and the ethical communities it created, Wieman found God in the "functioning unity" that makes society operate with moral purpose, and added that "it alone can save us." Here we have liberal theology's God in total descent into the world, and often its disintegration in it. For Wieman the only objects of religious inquiry are "the actual processes of human existence"(*1900–1950*, 275, 280).

Well before Wieman, liberal theology had set itself up for frontal attack. J. Gresham Machen issued his polemical but trenchant critique in 1923 with his *Liberalism and Christianity*. He made several indictments of liberalism: its humanization of Christ (we have no access to Jesus as a personality, he said), its immersion of God in the world and in human history (God must be understood as fully transcendent), its equating religion with life adjustments (the real issue is not the integrated personality; it is human sin), the recourse to understanding religion by means of the scientific method (central to Christianity are the biblical miracles), and in general the obliteration of the distinctions of natural and supernatural (nothing "natural" can be the source of our redemption). In short, Machen attested, "liberal Christianity" was not Christianity.

More, of course, followed. Dorrien gives extensive attention to Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and others who inveighed against liberal theology. Niebuhr considered it a corruption of Christianity in its humanistic content and thoroughly poisoned by its cohabitation with modern culture. Niebuhr recoiled from the moral idealism of liberalism. Christians' pacifism in the face of

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aggressive Nazi paganism he judged a bad combination of gospel perfectionism and bourgeois utopianism, and the mark of a "very, very sick" civilization (*1900–1950*, 470). All that had followed from Christianity's accommodation to evolutionary theory—the theology of immanence, the ideas of a redemptive history, the Social Gospel—Niebuhr maligned. His brother, H. Richard Niebuhr, excoriated liberalism as a correlative of modern materialist consumerism and as subservience to modernity. The church, he urged, has no obligation to tune its faith to the temporal shifts of history and the relativist aspects of modern civilization. Dorrien uses the term "neo-liberal" rather than the customary "neo-orthodox" to describe this revolt, although the "neo" in "neo-liberal" has an uncertain reference.[2] That they do belong in the tradition of liberal theology, however, becomes clear when one considers the really great challenge that had come to liberalism after World War I, the jolt delivered by Karl Barth. That encounter also highlights another theme in liberal theology's history in the United States—one, I believe, that makes some suggestions about the parallel universe of intellectual history.

Barth attacked theological liberalism on all fronts. The Swiss pastor who took up his work in Safenwil in 1911 had first combined his religious ideals with his passion for socialism. World War I left him bitterly disillusioned, the more so as he saw so many of Germany's great liberal religionists, his mentors among them, embrace nationalism and war. Some important addresses now severely faulting this liberalism came from Barth before he issued his commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans, the *Römerbrief*, in 1919, followed by the more militant second edition a few years later. Liberalism in theology signified for Barth the triumph of subjectivity and individualism and the loss of all external authority on the one hand, and the diminution of God in the historical process (as in God's absorption into nationalism) on the other. Barth wanted to see through and beyond history and find God in Scripture. He became fixed on the "infinite qualitative distinction" between God and man. If theology does not so locate itself, he believed, it will have only anthropomorphic measures of God, and indeed for Barth modern Christianity had become a wholly human-centered religion and essentially a human construct ("Man is the centre and measure of all things"). For Barth, God never becomes one with human history and neither does he become known to us by nature or metaphysics. Barth denied that we can speak of God in any meaningful sense. All understanding of God begins in a faith that alone makes God accessible to us through his word in Scripture. Barth placed the Renaissance, Cartesianism, the Enlightenment, Schleiermacher,

[2] Dorrien claims that he is the first to place Reinhold Niebuhr, John C. Bennett, and Tillich in the camp of liberal theology. But Richard Wightman Fox had done so previously. See his *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 147.

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and contemporaries like Adolph Harnack and Ernst Troeltsch among the guilty parties, but they had plenty of company.[3]

Barth's role is crucial for Dorrien's study of liberal theology. Readers in fact will better understand his discussion of the neo-liberals by consulting Dorrien's own book on Barth, which provides a rich intellectual setting for the "Barthian revolt" that he describes in modern theology.[4] Liberals, of course, had many reasons to fault Barth and to fear his dramatic impact in Europe and the United States. Dorrien summarizes the conflict:

> One way or another, liberal theology always took its stand on the verdicts of modern knowledge and experience without bowing to external authority claims. Liberals of all kinds decried the Barthian ascendancy as biblicist, dogmatic, authoritarian, provincial, and irrational. They accepted the naturalistic premises of modern historiography and the modernist valorization of objective knowledge. They specialized in cultural accommodation and religious progressivism. Every liberal theologian sought to bring Christian claims into line with beliefs derived from modern critical consciousness, and thus every liberal theologian from Schleiermacher to Macintosh took for granted that the authority of reason makes the mythical aspects of Christianity problematic for modern theology (*1900–1950*, 534).

Thus the Barthian impact effectively gave liberalism a cohesiveness (even if by way of a negative identity) that existed among its many diverse currents. It clarified things in an important way, for even those neo-liberals who urged return to a transcendent God (but one who is nonetheless in history), a God of judgment, and a humanity rooted in sin, had profound disagreements with Barth. Tillich charged that Barth expounded a one-sided supernaturalism. He found his theology dangerously deficient and void of any social or political ethics. "He, like all pessimistic supranaturalists," Tillich wrote, "is not interested in history as such nor in a social transformation for the sake of humanity."[5] Niebuhr had more in common with Barth than did Tillich but by the late 1940s Niebuhr was marking his distance from him, especially as Barth displayed a Cold War neutrality and detached the churches from any partisan or judgmental role in the US–Soviet rivalry. Niebuhr had faulted the naive idealism of the Social Gospel but had always found a large relevance for Christian understanding in shaping the moral condition of the world. Niebuhr also believed that Barthian neo-orthodoxy deprived Christian belief of all the fortifications it needed from modern knowledge and rendered it helpless in its confrontation with modern

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3 Quoted in David L. Mueller, *Karl Barth* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972). See also the discussion of Barth, at 13–53.

4 Gary Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

5 Quoted in Dorrien, *Barthian Revolt*, 133.

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culture. Eventually Niebuhr so despaired of the Barthian redirection of theology that he expressed "regret" at his own earlier attacks on liberalism.[6]

Some concluding remarks will take the discussion of liberal theology from this juncture and the clarifying effects that the Barthian impact made on liberalism into some reflections about intellectual history. As Dorrien has pointed out, by the time of the third generation of American liberals, their enterprise had located itself in academia—the theological seminaries and divinity schools. Their work had become scholarship, marked by expansive research and all the scaffolding and apparatus of academy publications. The field had its several stars and superstars and institutions competed to attract them. (However much Barth belittled liberal theology's vast metaphysical and sociological enhancements, he wrote massive volumes on church dogmatics and held professorships at Göttingen, Münster, Bonn, and Basel). Theology, like other academic disciplines in the humanities, often reflects certain mentalities that distinguish the kind of scholarship they produce and that fuel intradisciplinary rivalries. The kinds I have in mind describe, on the one hand, pursuit of an object of study in its pure, undifferentiated, and often hermetic state, and, on the other, pursuit of that subject in its extended, interconnected relationship to external realms of being, usually in specifically social or economic locations.

The Barthian theological intervention in the 1920s and thereafter brought these two habits of mind into bold relief. For well over a century, liberal theologians, in the manner of Dorrien's extensive accounts, had brought God into history; had fused, to varying degrees, the natural and supernatural; and had tried to locate the divine presence in the wide expanse of human experience, from the urban ghettoes in its social contexts to the healthy personality in individuals. They had conjoined God to the national purpose or to the changing directions of the modern intellect. Liberal theology's God was always an extended deity, never strictly contained by the Scriptural word alone, but given a large temporal and spatial activity. Liberals liked to observe their God in the messier realities that make human life what it is and provide all the challenges to it. This God of the diaspora gave liberalism its rich pluralism, its immense variety. And however much liberals thus differed one from the other, they had this quality of thought that made them stand apart from Barth. Barth spoke for a theological tradition that saw God as detached from humanity, remote (but not exclusively uninvolved) from its history, uncomplicated by any identity with society and politics, and, as Barth said, qualitatively differentiated from human nature. This divine being is self-contained; it has a unique selfhood, an intrinsic nature wholly unrecognizable by anything external to it. Reinhold Niebuhr referenced, in criticism, the "absolute

[6] Dorrien, *Barthian Revolt*, 135–9.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244311000278 Published online by Cambridge University Press

purity" of Barth's theological strain, the uncontaminated, undiluted, inscrutable character of Barth's God.[7]

Other academic disciplines have also displayed these two mentalities. In literature, for example, the New Criticism enjoyed an academic hegemony in the two decades or so after World War II. The New Criticism imposed a strict formalism on the study of literature. It tried to find the synthetic unity of a poem or novel by close attention to its textual structure; it wanted to describe the special qualities that associated that text with the unique quality of experience that one labels aesthetic. To that extent it permitted no external references—to biography, to social class, to history—that might otherwise explain the text's salient features. New Criticism's autotelic subject set itself directly against Marxist or psychological interpretations that insisted on contextualizing the literary edifice within any number of external associations and influences. Similar rival strategies have always existed in intellectual history and are familiar to individuals in this discipline. I will just provide one recent illustration.

In the same inaugural issue of this journal cited earlier, Lloyd Kramer contributed an essay review that considered two books: Donald R. Kelley's *The Descent of Ideas: The History of Intellectual History* (2002) and Mark Bevir's *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (1999).[8] Both books, as Kramer effectively describes, attest to a long-standing differentiation among intellectual historians respecting especially how they conceive the object of their study, ideas. The tradition of intellectual history that Kelley recounted "sought to bring ideas 'down' from the realm of timeless, transcendent truths into the complex historical realities of social experience, collective or personal identities, human institutions, and the struggle for power."[9] They believed that ideas are best understood, and disclose their "real" meaning, when placed in region, class, economic, and other contextual situations. Thus Kelley describes the "descent" of ideas into wider dimensions of life and the "eclectic" character of this form of intellectual history. Scholars in this externalist mode of intellectual history created the party of pluralism. As Kramer summarizes, it welcomes all efforts "to enter into historical dialogue

[7] Theological liberalism, to be sure, always had a certain fault line, one that might merit attention in a larger discussion of this subject. Thus William Dean, in his 1986 book *American Religious Empiricism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), distinguished between liberals who appeal to a transhistorical realm of spirit and liberals who place God in the historical process and believe his true nature is revealed teleologically (2, 13). I suggest here, though, that these differences point to two kinds of liberalism that nonetheless existed within large commonalities and that these parties coalesced in opposition to Barthian theological "purity."

[8] Lloyd Kramer, "Intellectual History and Philosophy," *Modern Intellectual History* 1 (2004), 81–95.

[9] Kramer's words; ibid., 81.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244311000278 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with the widest possible range of ideas, cultures, and interpretations of human experience."[10] Its practitioners moved intellectual history from "internal" to "external" focus and understood ideas as integral components of an extended social and cultural milieu. They are the intellectual parallels of the liberal theologians.

But if eclecticism seems to have become the preferred practice among intellectual historians, the purists still have their voices and Bevir speaks powerfully for them. As Kramer notes, Bevir does not like contextualism. He embraces a methodology that does not reference the lives or the historical experiences of individuals or groups, and he contains his investigations within the "logic of ideas" or the "web of ideas" prevalent in a particular historical moment. Bevir would like intellectual historians to have a greater concern for understanding a text than for explaining it. That concern would take us back to the purer text as opposed to the messier context. Here we find a Barthian theological parallel to intellectual history in its internalist mode.[11]

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Dorrien has produced a grand chronicle, a major contribution to American intellectual history. Liberal theology in his discussions always reaches out to take stock of the changing world, to see where it is going in its new ideas and changing social and political conditions, and thus often to direct or influence it. In so chronicling this activity Dorrien has valuably bought liberal theology into the mainstream of American intellectual history. He has shown that liberal theology is where religion does its creative thinking.

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[10] Ibid., 85.

[11] I am trying to highlight points of emphasis drawn from the review essay. Both Kelley and Bevir mediate these differences somewhat in the larger, more subtle points they make in their books, and, to be sure, other mediating practices have found their way into intellectual history writing. A recent forum on the status of intellectual history gives a new illustration of its eclecticism. Now, Daniel Wickberg suggests, intellectual history has become essential to other modes of historical inquiry. "Today," he writes, "there is evidence everywhere that intellectual history speaks to the dominant historiography of our day; its insights and methods have become part of the common coin of the most significant work currently being done." But, paradoxically, Wickberg believes, it has done so somewhat at the expense of its own identity. "Is Intellectual History a Neglected Field of Study?", in "The Current State of Intellectual History: A Forum," *Historically Speaking: The Bulletin of the Historical Society* 10 (Sept. 2009), 14–15.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244311000278 Published online by Cambridge University Press