



Liberalism versus Postliberalism: The Great Divide in Twentieth-Century Theology

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one Liberal Theology in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

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Abstract

The first chapter provides background for the later discussion (in chapters three and four) of liberal theology in the twentieth century. By describing three central concerns of liberal theological method in the nineteenth century, it provides evidence that the theologians described in later chapters as representative of the liberal tradition truly are representative. The first of these three concerns is a turn to the subject, exemplified by Schleiermacher. The chapter describes briefly his two major works, the *Speeches* and *The Christian Faith*. Ritschl exemplifies the second concern, the search for historical corroboration of claims about Jesus. Finally, the search for the essence of Christianity can be seen clearly in Harnack's *What is Christianity?* These three characteristic themes of nineteenth-century liberal theology will carry forward into the twentieth century and identify the theologians discussed in chapter four (especially Bultmann and Ogden) as standing squarely in the liberal tradition in theology.

Keywords: [essence of christianity](#), [Adolf von Harnack](#), [historical jesus](#), [liberal theology](#), [Albrecht Ritschl](#), [Friedrich Schleiermacher](#), [subjective turn](#)

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It was in the nineteenth century that liberal theology came into full flower. The dominant liberal theological tradition addressed a number of extremely thorny issues, and even the wrong turns taken by theologians represented important advances. From the beginning to the end of the century—while methods, theories, doctrines, and other developments were hotly contested and extensively debated—the liberal tradition's formulations of the task and method of theology were surprisingly congruent. As the century opened, the most important figure in theology (with the benefit of hindsight) was Friedrich Schleiermacher. As the century closed, Adolf von Harnack influenced the field more than any other, and in between was Albrecht Ritschl. Others, of course, were important and influential—for example, David Strauss, F. C. Baur, and Cardinal Newman, to name only a few—but Schleiermacher, Harnack, and Ritschl define the field in terms of liberal

theological method. Their conceptions of the task and method of theology evidence an astonishing coherence given that their work spans the whole century.

Further, their work nicely illustrates three concerns or themes characteristic of liberal theology throughout the century: First is an intense interest in the believing subject. In philosophy, Kant's Copernican revolution reversed the order between mind and what it perceived. Before Kant, it was assumed (and explicitly held by Locke, Hume, and others) that in cognition the mind receives impressions passively from the real world. Kant proposed that objects adapt themselves to our mind. Therefore, the world is at least partially a creation of our own mind, and the fundamental task of philosophy is to show how our experience is grounded in certain a priori structures of subjectivity itself. Among theologians in the nineteenth century, this turn to the subject is perhaps most closely associated with the name of Schleiermacher.

Second is a rapidly growing interest in the concrete events of history. Claims about Jesus, for example, must be grounded or validated by an appeal to historical evidence. This emphasis comes through particularly clearly in Ritschl, but obviously also in Harnack and others. Intrinsic to this growing interest in historical research was a recognition that an unavoidable aspect to historical research, historical judgments, and historical narratives is *value*—that is, value judgments are unavoidably operative at every level of doing history.

Third is a search for the essence of Christianity. Harnack's popular *What is Christianity?* provides an excellent example of this third concern (as do the many "Lives" of Jesus that appeared later in the century in the wake of Strauss's groundbreaking study).

These three concerns are interrelated, and all play important roles in the work of the century's three most influential theologians. When these three concerns operate together, at least in the liberal tradition in theology, what they yield is a theological method that is basically transcendental in the way it derives its basic concepts.

A brief consideration of these three theologians provides a methodological background for the development of liberal theology in the twentieth century. I shall not argue that this is the best way to characterize all or even most of liberal theology in the nineteenth century, nor will I survey a large range of that century's theologians. Instead, I shall show how these concerns operate in three of the most important and influential theologians of the nineteenth century in order to provide a basis for asserting (in chapter 4) that twentieth-century liberal theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann and Schubert Ogden do indeed stand in the dominant tradition of liberal theology when it comes to method.

I. The "Father" of Liberal Theology: Friedrich Schleiermacher

Friedrich Schleiermacher wrote during the heyday of the Romantic period (from about 1780 until the early 1830s) and exemplified many Romantic values. But the period should not be seen as a simple rejection of the Enlightenment. Instead, the Romantics tried to enlarge the vision of rationality, preferring a version of rationality that was neither an abstract rationalism nor a reductionistic empiricism. Experience was valued, but not in the way empiricism values it. Instead, it was the depth or intensity of experience that mattered to the Romantics; coupled with this was a new concern with the diversity of human life, a concern to give value to, and learn from, different points of view.¹

The Enlightenment had been concerned to investigate nature, but the Romantic emphasis on the depth of experience led to a search for the ways that an infinite or eternal spirit has infused the depths of nature. There is in most of the Romantics a mystical sense of the unity of nature, and of humanity's fundamental oneness with it. The Romantics wanted an understanding of this fundamental unity, an understanding that surpassed rationalism, and they felt that such an understanding could give them a better understanding of both humanity and nature.²

These concerns can certainly be seen in Schleiermacher, and he is generally considered to be the most important Protestant theologian between Calvin and the neo-orthodox period inaugurated by Karl Barth. Clearly, his two major theological works are the most systematically rigorous statement of liberal Protestant theology and its interpretation of the Christian religion, at least prior to Barth. This is what made Schleiermacher the target of neo-orthodox attack; Barth and Emil Brunner trace the “dead end” in liberal theology to the “false start” begun by Schleiermacher.³ Their critique was not universally accepted, and even Barth seems to have reconsidered later in his career. But whatever one thinks of their critique, Schleiermacher undoubtedly represents a crucial turning point in modern Protestant theology.

Schleiermacher’s earliest major work, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, is directed to his friends at the salon of Henrietta Herz, in an attempt to convince them that they are more religious than they think, that what they view as unacceptable about religion is not true religion at all, but a distortion. They were accustomed to the view that religion consists of believing in a personal God and personal immortality, along with a certain code of behavior. They simply found that they were more interested in other things.⁴

p. 22 Schleiermacher attempted to show them that those things in which they were most interested were precisely what religion could provide. In actuality, religion is a “sensibility and taste for the infinite,” a sense that makes the things they valued most even more deeply valuable. Religion is neither simply beliefs nor morals; yet it inspires the search for knowledge and “should accompany every human deed like a holy music....”⁵ Instead, he says, religion is in “the slumbering seed of a better humanity”; in it can be found passion that is truly noble and truly related to nature.⁶

Schleiermacher’s greatest breakthrough is usually judged to be his new interpretation of religion as primarily a matter of “feeling” (*Gefühl*) that originates in immediate self-consciousness.⁷ This judgment has much to commend it, for prior to Schleiermacher, religion had been thought of primarily as either an intellectual exercise or a moral one. At the time, the two most important ways of thinking about God were the English Deists’ conception of God as a machine-maker⁸ and Kant’s conception of God as a law-giver.⁹ Schleiermacher objects to both of these.

The Deist conception makes it difficult if not impossible to distinguish religious discourse from scientific discourse. If one argues that nature can (or cannot) be conceived without God, Schleiermacher’s rejoinder is that this has nothing to do with *religion*. For Schleiermacher the God of religion is not an item in some metaphysical scheme. The scientific way of knowing and talking about God treats God as finite, as the first cause among many. But this, he argues, is not the religious way of knowing and talking about God.

Likewise, Schleiermacher rejects any Kantian conception of religion as morality. Morality, he says, is concerned with humans, whereas religion is concerned with God. Morality is active—it concerns human action. In contrast, piety is passive—it involves submission to God’s action. Morality presupposes freedom, but piety accepts necessity. For Schleiermacher, piety takes its place alongside science and morality as a necessary and irreducible third mode of existence. Without it, humanity would be incomplete.¹⁰

p. 23 To find out what true religion is, Schleiermacher says that we must turn from the outward trappings of religion and descend to the innermost sanctuary of life. Thus, the proper method of studying religion is introspection on the content of consciousness. This introspection reveals a primitive unity of consciousness that exists before reflection has divided it into subject/object polarities. In this fleeting moment of introspection, there is no division between self and other. In this fleeting moment, we experience a unity with the world, and this unity awakens in us our point of contact with the infinite. Through his introspective analysis of religious experience, Schleiermacher comes to define religion as “the sensibility and taste for the infinite.”¹¹ Religion is the feeling that all that moves us in feeling is one, so that our living and being is living and being through God. Religion, therefore, has to do with the infinite, rather than with the finite. Thus, in the first place, contemplating nature alone will not get us to an understanding of true religion. And, in the second, one’s own

inner life must be plumbed first, then transferred to the realm of nature. The universe portrays itself most truly, he says, through the inner life. So the introspection that opens up religion to us also illuminates nature, rather than vice versa.¹²

But what about traditional religious doctrines? Are they not crucial to religion? As a feeling person, Schleiermacher says, I can become an object for myself when I consider my own feelings. Therefore doctrines are religious, but they are not religion. Feeling is essential to religion, Schleiermacher argues, but reflection is not, though it is in a certain sense unavoidable. Doctrines or religious beliefs may seem to trespass on science (*Wissenschaft*), but in fact they are of a different order, one that is independent of science.¹³ Schleiermacher here is clearly navigating between two ditches. On the one hand, he wants to avoid a theistic idea compounded of various attributes, which would conceive of God as a person like ourselves, a single extramundane deity.¹⁴ On the other hand, he also wants to avoid a pantheistic idea in which God is the single unity exalted above all personalism.¹⁵

p. 24 Almost all of Schleiermacher's critics accuse him of pantheism—and certainly he gives them ammunition by infusing his language with pantheistic metaphors. But in fact, for Schleiermacher, both traditional theism and pantheism are products of reflection. Therefore they are not part of religion. Further, neither is a mirror of what the Deity really is in itself. The gap between feeling and reflection cannot be overcome, and thus both traditional theism and pantheism fall short. Neither traditional theism nor pantheism, Schleiermacher maintains, can give a scientific knowledge of God. But this is no problem for religion; what matters is the structure of the feeling or experience that produced them both.¹⁶ Thus Schleiermacher insists that religion has its root in the human spirit. We cannot despise religion without also despising humanity; to leave out religion is to impoverish human life. Romantic despisers of religion are being quite inconsistent with Romanticism.

If religion is a universal human characteristic, how should we understand particular positive religion? Deists had argued that Christianity is true only insofar as it represented the core common to all religion. Thus, whatever was particular about it was superfluous. For Schleiermacher, this core, natural religion, is an armchair construct corresponding to no reality at all. This constructed "essence" of religion has nothing truly religious about it, Schleiermacher says, but is simply a mishmash of morals, metaphysics, and science.¹⁷ What is indispensable to religion is individuality. Even though the religious feeling is common to all, it can only express itself in a plurality of historical realities. Positive religion arises by selecting one religious expression, which then becomes the center of the religion. The truly religious person must pitch her tent somewhere, for true religion always expresses itself in some concrete positive form.¹⁸

p. 25 As for Christianity, its central theme is reconciliation.¹⁹ Creation and redemption constitute an indivisible whole, so Jesus occupies the central place. He, Schleiermacher says, is the author of the noblest that has yet appeared in religion. We should admire Jesus neither for his (unoriginal) moral teaching nor for his character. Instead, we should admire the divine in Christ, which is the clarity with which he exhibited the idea of the mediator.²⁰ Notice how Schleiermacher reorients the Christological question. The problem is not how to reconcile the two natures (divine and human), but to answer the questions "What is the religious ideal?" and "How is it to be related to Christ?" This is similar to Kant's approach in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. For Kant, the Son of God was the archetype of religious consciousness. This cannot be simply identified with Jesus, but in Christ it gains a public foothold and is exhibited. Schleiermacher proceeds in a similar way: he identifies the Christian idea of mediation as the central religious ideal. The significance of Jesus is then constituted by how he exemplified this ideal. But Jesus is not just a moral example (as nearly all Schleiermacher's critics assumed); more than a mere example, Jesus actually mediates his own intimacy with God. Yet Jesus never claims to be the only mediator. Instead, he calls his disciples to be mediators in and through him. If Schleiermacher is right about the essence of religion and of Christianity, then what this means, he thinks, is that Christianity is not the only possible religion. And he makes this argument in theological terms, not purely logical ones. Nothing, he argues, is more irreligious or "un-Christian" than to seek uniformity. Thus, new forms of religion must come, whether they are inside or alongside Christianity.²¹

Next to his allegedly pantheistic notion of God, Schleiermacher's treatment of the relationship of Christianity to other religions is the most criticized element of his *Speeches*. But it is difficult to deny that Schleiermacher's approach to non-Christian religions represents a substantial advance. During Schleiermacher's lifetime, orthodox theologians still ignored or dismissed other religions. Rationalist thinkers, on the other hand, still ignored or dismissed historically particular features of both Christianity and other religions. But for Schleiermacher, the unique, historically particular aspects of religion were what was *most religious* about it. So he tries to provide a third alternative to dogmatic exclusivism and rationalistic reductionism. Then, in *The Christian Faith (Glaubenslehre)*, he appears to abandon this third alternative and return to a more orthodox understanding. He took pains to assert that the two works were harmonious, but few have been persuaded. Schleiermacher's theological method, on the other hand, does display an interesting consistency from his early to late works.

Schleiermacher's understanding of religion as feeling echoes his Moravian upbringing and, in its Pietist tones, is not completely new. But the nuance of Schleiermacher's articulation of the religious self-consciousness gave a new intellectual power to an essentially Pietist religiosity, opening up a new way of understanding religion—neither rationalism nor essentially moral theory, but an irreducible third, *Gefühl*. Schleiermacher understood religion, as given in immediate self-consciousness, to be universal. All of our experience presupposes a sense of dependence—on others, our environing world, and ultimately on God. To use contemporary terms rather than Schleiermacher's own, this understanding of religion can be described (loosely) as transcendental and therefore as capable of providing a ground, in the Kantian sense, for all our talk about God.

p. 26 The conventional reading of Schleiermacher, in fact, sees this new definition of religion as providing just such a ground. Talk about God, whatever else it may be, is thus always and simultaneously talk about human subjectivity. Schleiermacher himself provides a good basis for such a reading in the introduction to *The Christian Faith*. There, he acknowledges that the typical arrangement of a dogmatic work had been to set out a doctrine of God as a single unit at the beginning. Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith*, though, begins with no such unit. Instead, he begins by saying that “dogmatics is a theological discipline, and thus pertains solely to the Christian Church.”²² The place to begin, then, is to figure out just what a church is. So Schleiermacher states that, at least for Protestants, “a Church is nothing but a communion or association relating to religion or piety,”²³ which leads to a discussion of piety or religion. Schleiermacher's understanding of religion is transcendental in this sense. All human experience, Schleiermacher suggests, can be described as a kind of knowing, feeling, or doing. But although knowing, feeling, and doing can be distinguished, they can never be separated. Any doing, he says, can arise from a knowing only insofar as it is “mediated by a determination of self-consciousness.”²⁴ Self-consciousness in turn has two elements, one of which is self-caused and the other of which is not, and these elements correspond (respectively) to the subject's activity and receptivity.²⁵ Determinations of self-consciousness that express receptivity are feelings of dependence, while those that express activity are feelings of freedom. But the kind of self-consciousness that accompanies an action, he says, is always related to a prior moment of receptivity. Thus only the feeling of dependence can be absolute, never the feeling of freedom. And religion or piety is precisely this feeling of absolute dependence. Yet the feeling of dependence, or at least absolute dependence, would not be recognizable as such without the feeling of freedom.

In the first instance God signifies for us simply that which is the co-determinant in this feeling and to which we trace our being in such a state; any further content of the idea of God must be evolved out of this signification. Now this is just what is principally meant by the formula which says that to feel oneself absolutely dependent and to be conscious of being in relation with God are one and the same thing, because absolute dependence is the fundamental relation which must include all others in itself.²⁶

p. 27 Schleiermacher then describes how the Christian experience of piety differs from other religions, and how it is related to the redemption accomplished by Jesus. Piety thus functions as a dogmatic limit in Schleiermacher, marking off dogmatics from both philosophy of religion and ethics. Dogmatics is never separate from these,

just insofar as knowing and doing are never, for Schleiermacher, separate from feeling. So piety functions as a limit in the sense that dogmatics has as its only subject matter the reflection on Christian piety or Christian experience.²⁷

More importantly, though, at least in terms of Schleiermacher's influence, this limitation of dogmatics to reflection on piety leads him to argue that dogmatic or doctrinal propositions are of three types: "descriptions of human states,...conceptions of divine attributes or modes of action, or...utterances regarding the constitution of the world...."²⁸ Of these three forms, the second and third are derivative from the first form, which is fundamental: "Hence we must declare the description of human states of mind to be the fundamental dogmatic form; while the propositions of the second and third forms are permissible only in so far as they can be developed out of propositions of the first form."²⁹

This threefold typology of dogmatic propositions leads directly to the famous concluding section in the introduction, in which he states that all dogmatic theology must proceed on the basis of "the direct description of the religious affections themselves."³⁰ And this leads to Schleiermacher's answer to those readers who, after reading the introduction, wondered what had happened to his doctrine of God. He states, "The doctrine of God, as set forth in the totality of the divine attributes, can only be completed simultaneously with the whole system."³¹ This is because dogmatic claims about divine attributes and modes of action "cannot be understood without previous knowledge" of "human soul-states"—that is, the religious affections.³² It is this conclusion that led most of Schleiermacher's readers to conclude that his entire theological program was anthropologically driven. Epistemic access to God, that is, was possible only through a prior understanding of human subjectivity. Whether this is the best way to read Schleiermacher is certainly debatable, but it has been the most common ↵ reading at least since Barth.³³ This reading of Schleiermacher helped motivate the great divide in theology in the twentieth century, for it was not only Barth and the postliberals who read him this way; most liberals did as well. And it is this method of grounding theological claims through an appeal to human subjectivity that was characteristic of liberal theological method in the twentieth century. But prior to that it found itself instantiated in Ritschl and Harnack as well.

II. Liberal Theology in the Later Nineteenth Century: Albrecht Ritschl

In the last few decades of the nineteenth century, advances were made in the application of the historical-critical method both to biblical texts and to the history of Christian doctrine. These advances imbued the intellectual climate with agnosticism regarding metaphysics and with excitement regarding historical-critical research. In this climate, German intellectuals' mid-century enchantment with Hegelian idealism began to seem outdated. So they returned to Kantian critical philosophy, and this return brought in its wake a revival of his position that the most important aspect of religion is its moral aspect. They therefore subordinated speculative reason to moral reason (at least in religion) and, coupled with this, focused increasingly on the empirical and the historical. Even our moral judgments do not emerge in a vacuum, but are mediated to us through our participation in a historical tradition and in social relationships.³⁴

All these moves can be seen in Albrecht Ritschl and his followers. Schleiermacher had been correct, they felt, in grounding religion in experience, but now there was an even stronger emphasis given to the notion that Christian experience can be appropriated only through particular historical events mediated through a community. Thus Protestant theologians not only returned to Kant, but they also began to reemphasize the importance of historical sources. This twofold emphasis became characteristic of followers of Ritschl.³⁵

Although Ritschl agreed that religion was a matter of experience, he rejected Schleiermacher's definition of religion as "the feeling of absolute ↵ dependence." First, Ritschl thought it a mistake for Schleiermacher to take the individual Christian's consciousness as the proper object of theology. This made theology too subjective, in Ritschl's view. Instead, the proper object of theology is historical—that is, the historical event of

Jesus Christ and the Gospel message presented in the New Testament. The sole norm for assessing Christian doctrinal claims is that of the historical Jesus. Thus the task of the theologian is essentially historical. Theology's primary task is to explicate not the consciousness of either the individual Christian or the church, but rather the meaning of God's self-revelation, historically given in Jesus Christ and witnessed to in the New Testament. So Ritschl is a preeminent example of the second theme of nineteenth-century liberal theology—the concern for historical validation.³⁶

Contrary to Schleiermacher, Ritschl held religion not to be a matter of intuition or feeling. It is, rather, entirely practical (in the Kantian sense). It is neither mystical feeling, nor metaphysics. Instead, religion is fundamentally “the experience of spiritual freedom,” of being freed from natural necessities.³⁷ Humans are both natural and spiritual beings; this dual nature (natural and spiritual) creates a contradiction that can only be overcome through religion. Only God can guarantee the victory of the moral and spiritual life over the natural order. Ritschl thus interprets specifically Christian experience not in terms of any experience of dependence, but in terms of freedom and liberation.³⁸ For Ritschl, the Christian experience of God is not an experience primarily of dependence, but of liberation that comes through faith in God's grace. But that grace is mediated to faith historically (and uniquely) in Christ. Christian knowledge of God thus comes through a historically mediated faith in and experience of God.³⁹

p. 30 Ritschl agrees with Kant that we cannot know things in themselves, but we can know things through their qualities and effects on us and through our response to them. Consequently, there are no uninterpreted historical facts. Facts are always interpreted according to a system of worth or value. As concepts, facts and values can be distinguished, but they are always ↳ inseparable. Consequently, God cannot be known in God's self, but only as God is revealed to us through God's effects on us. This means that God can be known only in God's worth or significance for us, as that worth or significance is experienced through a historically mediated faith.⁴⁰

For Ritschl, this indissoluble relation between fact and value means that we cannot know the objects of religious or theological reflection in themselves, whether through metaphysical knowledge or through immediate intuition. But it also means that the norms of theological adequacy are derived neither from a phenomenological account of Christian consciousness (whether individual or corporate) nor from a transcendental analysis of pure reason. Rather, they are established through a critical reconstruction of the concrete events of history (phenomena). Yet the actual historical norm, Jesus Christ, is never simply given empirically from bare historical facts. Instead, it is inescapably a value judgment of faith. For Ritschl, our knowledge of God—or of Christ as a theological norm—is gained only through God's effects on us (and through the operation of our value judgments). But that's not all; our knowledge of the historical Jesus is mediated in the same way—through his effects on the Gospel writers and on us. For Ritschl, theology must recognize and maintain the mutual interdependence of historical-critical research and value judgments of faith. Faith is utterly necessary, but so is application of rigorous historical criticism. Ritschl thought that only such historical criticism could save theology from speculation and subjectivism. Rigorous historical criticism is necessary if theology is to avoid the errors that too often accompany excessive subjectivism; it is also necessary in order to preserve the continuity of Christian identity. Yet theology must be honest and acknowledge the impossibility of naively empirical historical reconstructions. Therefore Ritschl built his theological method around two distinct and interconnected necessities—the necessity of historical research into the events through which Christians assert that God has been revealed and the necessity of value judgments of faith as an inescapable part of any judgment about the results of any historical research program.⁴¹

p. 31 Ritschl's method thus marked a distinct departure both from Schleiermacher on the one hand and Kant on the other. Claude Welch's ↳ judgment is on the mark: Ritschl's “was thoroughly a *church* theology and *theological* history. The theologian speaks only as a member of the religious community; theology is that community's critical self-knowledge. Everything that is said about the originating event is from the standpoint of the community.”⁴² In his history of the nineteenth century, Barth recognizes Ritschl's departure from

Schleiermacher precisely at the point of the importance of the historical figure of Jesus.⁴³ And Barth is not as directly negative in his judgment of Ritschl's method as he is of Schleiermacher's. Yet consider the points that (in the judgment of many) marked Ritschl's advance over both Schleiermacher and Kant—the inseparability of judgments of fact and of value and the hermeneutical interdependence of history and faith. These points meant that at the center of both hermeneutical judgments regarding the historical Jesus and the norms of doctrinal assessment was Ritschl's understanding of religious experience as an experience of value. And it was this that led postliberals like Hans Frei to read his theology as anthropologically driven. Thus, Frei says, Ritschl joins a host of others, from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries, who “have all been agreed that one way or another the religious *meaningfulness* (as distinct from demonstration of the truth) of the claim [that Jesus Christ is the Redeemer] could, indeed must, be perspicuous through its relation to other accounts of general human experience.”⁴⁴

Many historians have noted that Ritschl's work is an important bridge between nineteenth- and twentieth-century theology. In my view, one crucial aspect of this bridge is his linkage between historical judgments and the experience of value. History is therefore crucial, and so is experience—but not empirical experience so much as the experience of value. In the twentieth century, in what I will call a “purified” liberal theology, we will see that Schubert Ogden works these elements—historical research and the experience of value—explicitly into his method of validating theological claims.

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III. Liberal Theology at the Turn of the Century: Adolf von Harnack

Among the theologians upon whom Ritschl had the strongest influence, certainly one of the most important was Adolf von Harnack. The influence of Ritschl's concern for historical sources is obvious in Harnack. Equally influential, though, is Ritschl's understanding of the inseparability of historical judgments of fact and judgments of value. Harnack follows his mentor in this regard, and thus for Harnack a historical narrative always inevitably involves a series of value judgments. But this is not something to be regretted, Harnack maintains, because that history must bear significance for our present life. If it doesn't, he writes, it's not worthy of study.⁴⁵

Harnack undertook his massive study of the history of dogma because he understood the changes and developments in Christian dogma to have significance for contemporary Christian life. The significance of the history of dogma consists in its ability to reveal that dogmas themselves are not part of the eternal essence of Christianity. Thus the study of dogma actually frees the church from its tyranny. And this is what Harnack felt that the church in his day badly needed—to be freed from an authoritarian spirit that developed from misuse of dogmas and that was a deviation from the Gospel. This does not imply that individual dogmas were deleterious or deviations from the Gospel. On the contrary, many were historically useful to prevent distortions of the Christian message. Put another way, they allowed Christianity to endure when times changed. “The history of the Church,” he writes, “shows us in its very commencement that ‘primitive Christianity’ had to disappear in order that ‘Christianity’ might remain....”⁴⁶ This same process was repeated throughout the history of the church. But for Harnack this process makes it clear that dogmas are historically conditioned. Thus, once the historical conditions that made them necessary have passed, the need for the dogmas that accompany them passes as well.⁴⁷

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One corollary to this view of the history of Christian dogma is that Christianity is not identical with any particular historical form. Indeed, this is Harnack's view. But if this is the case, the question naturally arises, “What is it that gives Christianity a continuity of identity?” If Christianity is to remain a living religion, and one that is the same religion as its previous historical instantiations, then an answer to this question must be possible. Harnack articulated the issue like this: “[E]ither the Gospel is...identical with its earliest form, in which case it came with its time and has departed with it; or else it contains something which, under differing

historical forms, is of permanent validity. The latter is the true view.”⁴⁸ This “something” that is “of permanent validity” will be the essence of Christianity, and Harnack believed it could be identified and abstracted from the particular historical forms of Christianity. Harnack was hardly the only one to search for the essence of Christianity; indeed, it was a third theme of liberal theology in the nineteenth century. It is important to see that it arises quite naturally out of the concern for the historical sources of theology and biblical interpretation. Harnack’s search for the essence of Christianity was certainly one of the most influential, and he pursues it in his most popular book, *What is Christianity?* Published at the turn of the century, it was immediately and widely influential, and many consider it to be the most elegant and powerful statement of Protestant liberal theology, at least in Harnack’s own era.⁴⁹ The question Harnack pursues in the book is obvious from its title, and his answer is that “the Christian religion is something simple and sublime; it means one thing and one thing only: Eternal life in the midst of time, by the strength and under the eyes of God.”⁵⁰ This answer is Harnack’s (German Protestant) interpretation of the essence of Christianity; not surprisingly, he arrives at it historically. He does not share Strauss’s extreme skepticism toward the historical Jesus, though of course he was sensitive and realistic about his sources and is rightly regarded as the most erudite historian of his era. The historian’s task, he says, is inevitably interpretive, for she cannot help but make decisions about the relative importance not only of sources, but of the events themselves. Indeed, the historian of Christianity “is of necessity required not to cleave to words but to find out what is essential.”⁵¹ He gives more detail to his answer by summarizing Jesus’ life and teaching under three themes: “the kingdom of God and its coming[,]...God the father and the infinite value of the human soul,” and “the higher righteousness and the commandment of love.”⁵² The reason Harnack is often said to be a “primitivist” is that after describing what he takes to be the permanently enduring essence of Christianity, he then gives a summary interpretation of the history the church, describing why he thinks both the Orthodox and Catholic traditions have turned away from it. Luther briefly revived a form of Christianity much closer to the original essence of the religion, but soon the Protestant churches followed their Catholic and Orthodox predecessors.

Harnack has an interesting relationship to the divide between liberals and postliberals in the twentieth century. In the early 1920s, after Barth broke with liberal theology and after the publication of the second edition of his *Epistle to the Romans*, Harnack was one of the most prominent defenders of the liberal tradition in Protestant theology; in fact, Harnack was among those whom Barth viewed as liberal theology’s chief representatives. Yet two things make Harnack a complicated target: First, the most prominent question regarding religion in the nineteenth century in German academic circles was not “What is Christianity?” but rather “What is religion?” On my reading, in approaching this latter question, Harnack does not propound a general theory of human subjectivity and then work out a philosophical or scientific answer, studying particular religions such as Christianity only as species of the genus “religion.” Instead, he begins with the question of what is Christianity in the hope that this “may...also throw light by the way on the more comprehensive one, What is Religion, and what ought it to be to us?”⁵³ Second, the book bears striking differences from, as well as one striking resemblance to, Frei’s own summary of the essence of Christianity in *The Identity of Jesus Christ*.⁵⁴ The resemblance is simply that both attempted to contribute to the search for the essence of Christianity. But whereas Harnack relied on the fruits of historical research, Frei relied on literary criticisms of the Gospels. And whereas for Harnack it is Jesus’ teachings that are of primary importance, for Frei it is the depictions of Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection where the essence of Christianity is most clearly to be discovered. Barth and Frei both eventually came to see Schleiermacher as a more complicated target of Barthian critique than he initially appears to be. In my own judgment, the same can be said of Ritschl and Harnack, too, though neither Barth nor Frei, I think, would agree. Indeed, I do not think Frei would deem it important that Harnack thought that studying Christianity would illuminate the study of religion, rather than vice versa. Frei states, “It seemed to Harnack, as to many other liberal theologians at the time...that Christianity really illustrated the perfection, or the most complete embodiment, of the genre religion. Therefore, if you studied the Christian religion, you studied religion in principle.”⁵⁵ And I think that Frei would draw a sharp distinction between the respective projects of Harnack’s *What is Christianity?* and his own *The Identity of Jesus Christ*: For Harnack, Frei says, “the very notion of religion, including Christian religion, had...an

intellectual or moral-spiritual essence. It was not really the kind of complex organism which had to be understood as a social and cultural artifact, a continuous and constantly recreated structure in its own right.”⁵⁶ Frei acknowledges that Harnack played an important role in the University of Berlin’s rejection of a proposal to transform its theology faculty into a faculty of the science of religion, and he also insisted on retaining pastoral education in the university as well. But Frei attributes this to a confusion on Harnack’s part, arguing that his understanding of religion, and of Christianity in particular, actually pointed to the opposite position.⁵⁷

IV. Themes as the Century Turns

The three liberal theologians I have mentioned briefly in this chapter show a few things about liberal theology. Clearly, it is a project of remarkable nuance capable of addressing and using to its own ends insights and developments from a wide range of nontheological disciplines (if indeed there are such things). Further, this suppleness characteristic of liberal theology permitted an integration of the three themes mentioned at the beginning of this chapter—a focus on religious experience characteristic of modernity’s turn to the subject, a deep concern for historical investigation of all theological claims (including a recognition that value judgments are an integral and unavoidable aspect of historical investigation), and a search for the essence of Christianity (as well as of religion).

p. 36 Yet there was a danger lurking. As the Greek tragic poets saw so clearly, every virtue has not only a corresponding vice, but also the capability—in *↳* itself and *as a virtue*—to bring its bearer not only honor and happiness but also ruin. Nineteenth-century liberal theology’s ability to address the characteristic concerns of the century and to integrate its achievements resulted in a theological dynamic that, in the view of many, would privilege epistemology over metaphysics (at least eventually). As we will see, this would be Frei’s judgment. Whatever one thinks of his assessment of individual theologians, the point is sound. Indeed, prominent and influential strands of modern continental philosophy have exhibited this characteristic as well.

This kind of assessment of liberal theology can be seen as an inquiry into what a particular strand or tradition of theology (or a particular theologian) takes to be “first philosophy” (or whatever the theological equivalent might be). This is the kind of analysis most often used by neo-orthodox and postliberal theologians (and others) in their assessments of liberal theology. So one way to analyze the liberal/postliberal divide in theology is to ask how each tradition differs regarding the relative privileging of epistemology and metaphysics.

But this is not the only analytical question that might be asked regarding differences over theological method. Another question that might be asked is how liberals and postliberals differ over religious or theological language. That is the question I will try to answer in the chapters that follow. It is the question raised by the falsification challenge posed to theology in the middle of the twentieth century. And while many take that challenge to have been answered, in my own view it continues to have substantial analytical importance. It profoundly influenced the way the three themes in liberal theology that I’ve discussed in this chapter were developed by liberal theologians in the twentieth century, at least from the middle of the century onward. It also exerted a significant influence on the contours of the debate between liberal and postliberal theologians in the latter part of the twentieth century. So, before turning to the development of what I will call a “purified” liberal theology in the twentieth century, it will be useful to analyze the challenge issued by the falsification theorists.

Notes

1. James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, vol. 1: *The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1997), 83–84.

2. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 84–86.
3. See Karl Barth, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Brian Cozens and John Bowden (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 411–59. Originally published as *Die protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1947; repr., 1952).
4. Brian Gerrish, *Continuing the Reformation: Essays on Modern Religious Thought* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), 158.
5. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988; repr., 1994), 103 (page references are to reprint edition; hereafter *Speeches*). See also Gerrish, *Continuing the Reformation*, 158.
6. Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, 83.
7. Claude Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 1: 1799–1870 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1972), 68. See Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, 105–10.
8. William Paley, *Natural Theology* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1845), 37–38, 40–42, 49–51, 82–83; selected passages reprinted in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 4th ed., ed. Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), 212–14.
9. Kant located religion not in the intellect but in the moral will, and this placement led him to define (natural) religion as “the recognition of all our [moral] duties as divine commands” (Immanuel Kant, *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*, in *Werke in sechs Bänden*, Band 5 [Köln: Könnemann, 1995], 182).
10. Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, 97–108, 130.
11. Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, 103.
12. Cf. Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, 116–18.
13. Cf. Schleiermacher’s discussion of miracles (*Speeches*, 132–33).
14. So he says that immortality as the desire for personal persistence is the antithesis of religion. The loss of self is not a severe loss; what is to be desired is loss of life for God’s sake (Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, 139–40).
15. Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, 134–38.
16. Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, 136–39 (cf. 197–99).
17. Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, 192–93.
18. Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, 195–200.
19. Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, 213.
20. Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, 218–19.
21. Schleiermacher, *Speeches*, 219–21.
22. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 2d ed., ed. and trans. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989), § 2.
23. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, § 3.1.
24. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, § 3.5.
25. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, § 4.1
26. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, § 4.1.
27. See Brian A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982), 201–202.
28. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, § 30.
29. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, § 30.2. It is rooted in his understanding of knowledge (Gerrish, *Old Protestantism and the New*, 201).
30. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, § 31.
31. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, § 31.2.
32. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, § 31.2.
33. I myself follow Brian Gerrish in thinking this reading something of a misreading. See Gerrish, *Tradition and the Modern World: Reformed Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1977), 13–48; and *Continuing the Reformation: Essays on Modern Religious Thought* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), 147–77.
34. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 270–71. My reading here of Ritschl will largely follow that of Livingston in *Modern Christian Thought* (270–81).
35. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 270–71.
36. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 272–73.
37. Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*, vol. 3, trans. H. R. Mackintosh and A. B. Macauley (Edinburgh, 1900), 199. The quoted phrase is Livingston’s (*Modern Christian Thought*, 273).
38. Ritschl, *Justification and Reconciliation*, 199. See also Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 273.
39. Ritschl, *Justification and Reconciliation*, 209–10. See also Claude Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 2: 1870–1914 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1985), 8–10; Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 273.

40. Ritschl, *Justification and Reconciliation*, 212. See also Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 274.
41. Still, the necessity of accessing the historical Jesus through the witness of the church does not mean that he took an uncritical attitude toward the primitive traditions. Instead, all traditions must be judged by the historical figure presented by Christ's life. This means that all speculation concerning Christ's preexistence and post-historical existence must be checked by what we know about the historical figure. This applies to those supernatural events of the Gospels such as Christ's Virgin Birth, his miracles, and the Resurrection. For Ritschl, these traditions are not integral to any estimate of the historical figure of Christ. It is at this point that the ambiguity of Ritschl's hermeneutic becomes clear. For Ritschl, the historical Jesus movement erred in seeking to derive the normative Jesus Christ solely from bare historical facts, yet he himself makes historical judgments as to what traditions concerning Jesus are normative for faith on the basis of the criterion of the "historical figure presented by His life" (*Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*, 406, also quoted in Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 276). Thus it seems that he wants to infer Christological normativity only from certain strata of the historical traditions.
42. Claude Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 2: 1870–1914 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1985), 14 (emphasis in original).
43. Barth, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, 644–47.
44. Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1974), 128 (emphasis in original).
45. "We study history," he says, "in order to intervene in the course of history and we have a right and a duty to do so....[W]ith respect to the past, the historian assumes the royal function of a judge, for in order to decide what of the past shall continue to be in effect and what must be done away with or transformed, the historian must judge like a king. Everything must be designed to furnish a preparation for the future" (Harnack, "Über die Sicherheit und Grenzen geschichtlicher Erkenntnis," in *Reden und Aufsätze*, 7 vols. [Giessen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1904–30], 4:7; quoted in Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 287).
46. Adolf von Harnack, *What is Christianity?* (London, 1901; repr., New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957; 2d repr., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986), 13–14 (page references are to second reprint edition).
47. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 287–88.
48. Harnack, *What is Christianity?* 13–14.
49. The historian James Livingston, for example, writes, "More than any other book it represented the spirit of Protestant Liberalism in the decades just prior to WWI" (Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 290; see also 286).
50. Harnack, *What is Christianity?* 8.
51. Harnack, *What is Christianity?* 13.
52. Harnack, *What is Christianity?* 51.
53. Harnack, *What is Christianity?* 6.
54. Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975; repr., Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf & Stock, 1997) (page references are to reprint edition).
55. Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1992), 116.
56. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, 117.
57. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, 116–18.