

JAMES O. DUKE
Texas Christian University

THE MAKING OF AMERICAN LIBERAL THEOLOGY

A review of Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity (1900-1950)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003. 666 pp. \$39.95.

THIS IS THE SECOND VOLUME of Dorrien's trilogy on "American Liberal Theology" from early nineteenth-century origins to the present. The first volume, subtitled "Imagining Progressive Religion" surveyed the rise and fitful flow of theological liberalism's divers headwaters in the United States from 1805 to 1900. The concluding work, forthcoming, will cover the last half of the twentieth century under the apt rubric "crisis, irony, and postmodernism." A genuinely serious scholarly project of such scale is ambitious, and costly too. Both Westminster John Knox Press and Dorrien deserve, I think, a word of thanks for their upfront investment.

At the forefront of attention in this volume are liberalism's ascent to dominance of the institutional power centers of (then-emerging) "mainline" Protestantism during the early twentieth century and its survivalist metamorphoses during the 1930s and '40s. In his introduction, Dorrien orients readers to his project and his preferential options regarding terminology and topical emphases in light of previous interpreters of liberalism. He then separates out the half-century's course of theological into eight chapters. Each focuses on a notably influential movements, schools or "types" of liberal thought, which Dorrien sets forth in theology-as-biography fashion, that is, by way of intellectual-career portraits of major figures.

The characters and causes presented here are the staples of textbooks and anthologies on twentieth-century theology in America. Chapter One tracks the mainstreaming of Protestant liberalism, highlighting William Adams Brown, William Newton Clark, and the extended family of trans-North Atlantic Ritschlianism. The social gospelers appear in Chapter Two, the early Chicago school in Chapter Three, and the pragmatic-empirical turn "in the spirit of William James" that moved from Edward Scribner Ames to Douglas Clyde Macintosh to Gerald Birney Smith and on to Henry Nelson Wieman in Chapter

Four. The generations of the Boston Personalists appear in Chapter Five. Dorrien groups Harry Emerson Fosdick, Rufus Jones, Georgia Harkness, and Benjamin E. Mays together in Chapter Six as exemplars of liberal “practical divinity” and “the authority of spiritual experience.” Chapter Seven deals with Reinhold Niebuhr, John C. Bennett, and Paul Tillich, who are characterized here as “neoliberals.” H. Richard Niebuhr, Henry Van Dusen, and Howard Thurman take center stage in Chapter 8, entitled “modern gospels.” (The top right page chapter header actually reads “schools of good religion,” a very bookish phrase as harmless and uninformative as “modern gospels” but apparently a copy-editing blooper.)

In and around these vignettes Dorrien weaves strands of retrospective, anticipatory, and supplementary comment that flesh out a narrative story-line considerably more lively than theology’s historians usually offer. Other merits come readily to mind. Command of the significant primary and second literature is as evident in the phrasing of points along the way as it is in the introduction and extensive (seventy-two pages of worthy but eye-straining) notes. Dorrien’s inclusion of lengthy, serious discussion of women and African Americans theologians—Vida Scudder, Georgia Harkness, Benjamin May, and Howard Thurman—is an all-too-belated historiographical advance, and certainly welcome now. Last but not least, Dorrien’s is, it seems to me, very much a “tough love” account of the liberals and liberalism. That is, it’s a critico-constructive reading of its subject.

All things considered, the book—and indeed the set, though Volume Three is as yet unseen—belongs in the special category I designate required reading for all would-be experts and truth-tellers who refer to theological liberalism at large or to any of the people, places, and things Dorrien discusses. I shy away from the term “definitive,” which appears on some book jacket blurbs. Not even Dorrien’s best efforts can produce a *definitive* account of these two-hundred years of theologians whom so many still love, and so many others still love to hate, and countless others pretend to “know” for fear of revealing how scant and unreliable their sources of “knowledge” are. Even so, Dorrien has set a new and higher historiographical level of discussion for liberal theology. To ignore—or merely evade—his reading rather than rebut it is an act of bad history as well as bad faith.

My judgments and instincts dovetailed so often with those in this volume and its prequel that points of dispute triggered second thoughts on my part. Dorrien defines “liberalism,” correctly I think, as a broad, cascading Christian (sub)tradition with multiple branches, currents, and cross-currents—hence a phenomenon that cannot be reduced to its classical, early nineteenth-century programs. The Niebuhr brothers, John Bennett, and Tillich are placed, again

correctly I think, in this category, even though Dorrien's own classificatory term for them, "neoliberal," is more a place-marker than a descriptive label.

This is not to say, of course, that there is much to question, quibble over, or even fault for the sake of yet greater accuracy or for some other worthy cause. The bookend dates 1900 and 1950 are of course only approximations. The *terminus ad quem* is a particular curiosity in that all of Dorrien's "neoliberals," adding now Bultmann, maintained their sway for some twenty years thereafter. Dorrien's several books on 1950-2000 developments (*The Word as True Myth*, 1997; *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology*, 1998, and *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology*, 2000) are presumably signs of things to come in volume 3 of *The Making of Modern Liberal Theology* series. Yet they don't explain how Dorrien intends to negotiate the overlap—the continuities as well as the disruptions—of "liberal theology" between 1950 and 1970/1975.

One strength is Dorrien's keen sensitivity to the concerns of social ethics in the liberal theology tradition. This emphasis is not surprising in the case of an ordained Episcopal priest who identifies with distinctly Barthian and social gospel themes, albeit in a much revised form. It is nonetheless in conformity with the documentary evidence: the theologies of liberals were oriented to the "social" (viz., socio-cultural) ethical issues of their day. As a result Dorrien provides an overview of the socio-ethico-philosophical-theological commitments of liberal theology. What passes today for familiarity with this history is piecemeal at best and know-nothingism at worse. Reading Dorrien's book is in either case therapeutic.

That said, it must also be said that this strength of this study is at the same time an index of what seem to me desiderata, or still unresolved issues, of historiography. I'll cite only two. Compared to, for example, Claude Welch's two-volume *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, which is structured much like this book along the lines of influential movements or schools as represented by major figures, Dorrien affords readers a far less distinct and easily repeatable summary of church doctrine per se. It is tempting to say, of course, that Dorrien's work is more oriented to socio-cultural history than Welch's. Yet his emphasis on the social-cultural, ethical engagement of yesterday's liberals remains very much a "history of ideas," in contrast to socio-cultural methodology. *Why* it was that liberal stress on the "religion of Jesus," e.g., went along with a social(ist) gospel—to cite Dorrien's wording with its parenthesis—is never explored. The questions of how and why liberal views first gained *Realpolitik* power in at least some quarters and then in time lost this power are also unaddressed.

In sum, this is a well-written, well-researched, and important book. It doesn't give answers to everything everyone wants to know about liberal theology. But it expands and deepens scholarly discussion of the matter, and it is an invaluable introduction and reintroduction to liberalism for those who think they already know who was who and what was what.

JAMES O. DUKE is Professor of the History of Christianity and the History of Christian Thought at Brite Divinity School, Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas. He has held previous appointments at the University of Montana, Pacific School of Religion, and as Gastprofessor at the University of Munich. Translator of several Schleiermacher texts, including the *Hermeneutics*, Duke has also authored a monograph on Horace Bushnell and co-edited *Makers of Christian Theology in America* and *Sources of Christian Theology in America*. He has served as coeditor of the *AAR Studies Series* and Book Review Editor of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. He is currently editor of the "Modern Christianity" section for *The New Westminster Dictionary of Church History*.

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