

# Liberation and Postliberalism

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One hopeful future for liberation theology may be as a leaven, a spur to the conscience, in a predominantly non-liberation theological academy. Liberation theologies, and their near relatives in constructive theology, will never die; but neither is there any immediate prospect of their taking over the mainstream, in either teaching or publication. For as liberation theologies defined themselves, the postliberal reaction was already brewing. That reaction has become the regnant orthodoxy of the theological academy. In that context, some of the most exciting theology being done today is methodologically under the broad postliberal umbrella, but understands itself as responsible to the theo-ethical force of the liberation movement.

It is difficult to speak of liberation theology as a whole, for it is profoundly internally diverse. This paper treats it as a distinctive movement in history, a broad but still definable collection of commitments, methodologies, contexts, and major personalities. Particular liberation theologies are distinct from one another, but they share, to some extent, a mutually comprehensible movement consciousness.

The liberation theology movement has addressed itself wisely and prophetically to the theological mainstream, whose subject was presumptively White, gender- and sexually-normative men of great social privilege. Hence, the genesis of liberation theologies. The earliest stages of the movement were marked by the theological critique of White supremacy, imperialism, misogyny, homophobia; and by the identification of these demonic strongholds as not only great ills of humanity, but as theological errors. A classic statement is the early Cone:

The sickness of the Church in America is intimately involved with the bankruptcy of American theology. When the Church fails to live up to its appointed mission, it means that theology is partly responsible. Therefore, it is impossible to criticize the Church and its lack of relevancy without criticizing theology for its failure to perform its function.<sup>1</sup>

The following pages of *Black Theology and Black Power* make explicit the Barthian substructure here—a substructure Cone later distanced himself from, and which other liberation theologies did not necessarily share. The critique, however, was clear; and Cone, for one, has not backed down from it.<sup>2</sup> The theological academy was not only in sin for its complicity and complacency in the face of those evils. It stood accused of idolatry. Theology had failed clearly to name the

Christian God as the Liberator with respect to those ills. That accusation came, moreover, in the formal languages of academic theology itself. From the mainstream's perspective, it was faced with a challenge it had, somehow, to meet.

In its institutional form, liberation theology has served as a reform movement within the theological academy more than a revolution to tear that academy down and replace it. It is certainly possible to argue that the true home of liberation theology was in the base communities, the churches, and the streets; but I speak here of liberation theology's academic face, the one speakable in the *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*.<sup>3</sup> That liberation theology founded professional societies and working groups, but we cannot point to major new seminaries the movement founded, or to mainstream institutions that heard the word and closed their doors in shame. We can point, rather, to some institutions that the movement touched and reshaped, Union Seminary among them.

Some reform movements succeed by joining the institutions they critiqued. Judging that success, in the case of this movement, is difficult, for the reception of liberation theology by the theological academy has been strikingly uneven. Individual liberationists teach in a wide variety of contexts, but it is quite possible to have a mainstream theology faculty without any committed liberationist voice. Who is the liberation theologian at Yale? At Princeton Theological Seminary? At Harvard?<sup>4</sup>

Contrast that situation to postliberalism, the academic orthodoxy that has followed liberationism. Its success is harder to measure objectively; a broad attempt follows. Who are the postliberals? Peter Ochs provides one possible canon in his *Another Reformation*—to wit: George Lindbeck, Robert Jenson, Stanley Hauerwas, John Howard Yoder, David Ford, and John Milbank.<sup>5</sup> One can always quibble with a list, but the common themes here are clear enough. They would insist on the irreducible particularity of the Christian witness, as expressed in the utterly distinct community we call Church. They draw together into that theme seemingly disparate interests in patristics; in Faith and Order ecumenism; in Christian narrative, language, and practice; and in the later work and legacy of Karl Barth. Ochs' book, a treatise on anti-supercessionism in postliberalism, plausibly suggests another such theme. Indeed, all of these themes are prefigured more or less explic-

3 The identity of the true subject of theology is a classic liberation-theological topic in its own right and a major topic of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians through the mid-'80s. A pithy, pointed summary of the issues at stake in that major liberation-theological setting is in Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Who Does Theology? Reflections on the Subject of Theology," in *Doing Theology in a Divided World*, Papers from the Sixth International Conference of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, January 5-13, 1983, Geneva, Switzerland, ed. Virginia Fabella & Sergio Torres, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), pp. 143-149.

4 As of this writing, faculty listings for these institutions may be found, respectively, at <http://divinity.yale.edu/faculty-listing>; [http://www3.ptsem.edu/intContent.aspx?id=1251&menu\\_id=72](http://www3.ptsem.edu/intContent.aspx?id=1251&menu_id=72); <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/faculty-research/faculty>. Yale has Emilie Townes as a leading voice in womanist ethics, and Harvard a likewise leading voice in feminist New Testament studies in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. The rhetorical question here does not question their status as liberationists, but as theologians in the narrow, academic-disciplinary sense.

5 Peter Ochs, *Another Reformation: Postliberal Christianity and the Jew*, (Ada, MI: Baker Academic), 2011.

1 James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997). 83.

2 James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011), especially the chapter on Niebuhr.

itly in Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*, which is arguably postliberalism's major rallying cry.<sup>6</sup> Institutionally, postliberals are associated with Yale and Cambridge, with later satellites at Duke and Virginia.

Liberation theology has been defined above as a movement, and postliberalism as an orthodoxy. The lack of parallelism between them seems clear enough. Academic liberation theologians are likely to be highly conscious of their movement status, to claim and proclaim it. Postliberals, for their part, hold at best a diffident relationship to that label: There is no "Postliberal Theology Group" in the American Academy of Religion, for instance. Liberation theologians are sometimes eager to discover extra-academic and pre-sixties liberation theologians—I am thinking here in particular of Gayraud Wilmore's historical work on *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, or in a more apologetic mode, of John Boswell's classic retrievals of premodern queer Christian history.<sup>7</sup> Postliberals have engaged no equivalent project, preferring in their historical mode to adopt a rhetoric of neutral discernment.<sup>8</sup>

What is the relation between the liberation theology movement and the postliberal orthodoxy it presently confronts? One hopeful answer appears in a knot of mainstream, broadly postliberal theologians who nevertheless display a sense of theological accountability to the liberation challenge. They include Kathryn Tanner, J. Kameron Carter, Eugene Rogers, and Sarah Coakley. None of them is quite a movement figure, doing liberation theology as such; but all of them, this paper will argue, theologize as though responsible for human liberation.

Sometimes, that responsibility comes through in the theologian's textual interlocutors. In that category, this analysis would put Coakley and Carter. As of this writing, Coakley's major work is still the essay collection *Powers and Submissions*.<sup>9</sup> Those essays, though almost twenty years old in some cases, have held up well. Mostly centered on gender, they relate that trope to *kenosis*, subjectivity, epistemology, embodiment, and the social trinity. Their freshness comes from their sense of ethical and spiritual urgency, a sense that comes in turn from Coakley's feminism. Most of the essays are explicitly framed as responses to classic feminist interventions in theology and philosophy: to Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Judith Butler.<sup>10</sup> She finds more value in traditional formulations and dogmas than do her feminist sources, but her characteristic move is to affirm both the patristic and the feminist position in a form neither of them would have

6 George A. Lindbeck, 25th anniv. ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009). The book's subtitle, "Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age" is perhaps most directly responsible for the popularity of the term.

7 Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998); John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, (New York: Villard Books, 1994).

8 See, e.g., Lindbeck's description of systematic theology as "descriptive" Lindbeck 2009, 99.

9 Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), for all citations in this paragraph.

10 On Daly: 111, 128; on Radford Ruether: 3-39; on Butler: 153-167.

originated.<sup>11</sup> It would be false to suggest, therefore, that Coakley's syntheses are always acceptable to all feminists. (On that point, the reception of her forthcoming multi-volume systematic theology is likely to be decisive.) Rather, her ingenuous engagement of feminist liberation is what makes her rather postliberal theology compelling.

Carter, likewise, has one major work to his name, his *Race: A Theological Account*.<sup>12</sup> Structurally, the book is built around a critique of post-Enlightenment racialization from two sources: Patristic Christology on the one hand, the Black church on the other, including both early modern and twentieth-century sources from the latter. Carter's use of patristic and early-modern Black sources is studiously naïve, an act of outright reclamation.<sup>13</sup> His response to the twentieth-century theologians and theorists of race is more complex. In brief, he finds their formulations helpful and even correct, as far as they go, but he sees all of them as insufficiently theological: "[t]he black religious academy has yet to really plumb the theological depths of modernity's racial problematic," he argues in his opening summary.<sup>14</sup> To see modernity's ills as theological error first of all is postliberal through and through. The move is familiar in postliberal precursors like MacIntyre, and in exemplars like Lindbeck and Milbank, the latter Carter's teacher at Virginia.<sup>15</sup> To identify racism as a core theological error, however, betrays the decisive influence of Black liberation theology. Carter's careful handling of figures like West and Cone suggests he knows it.<sup>16</sup>

The other two figures named above, Kathryn Tanner and Eugene Rogers, are responsive to liberation movements, not in their choice of ancestors, but in their contemporary engagements. Demographically, they have much in common. Both are White, gay Episcopalians who hold Yale Ph.Ds. Theologically, they share a profound tentativeness in their engagement with earlier movement work. Rogers' *Sexuality and the Christian Body*, though an eloquent exposition of a pro-gay theology of marriage, has nothing whatever to say about most of the works

11 I have in mind especially her discussion of Daly on 128: "In this sense Mary Daly's spoof [of the Trinity as all-male social club] is vindicated, although in a way more subtle and positive for an alternative trinitarian picture than Daly would ever acknowledge."

12 J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

13 On the early-modern Black sources: "My reading surfaces the intuitive grasp these writers had into what was theological about the modern problem of race generally and the theological constitution of whiteness in particular" (ibid., 6). The patristic sections "point out the degree to which this early Afro-Christian theological imagination ... is in keeping with theological sensibilities that actually predate it and that predate, one might say, the medieval theological mistake that set in motion the intellectual and social processes of the racial production of the human" (ibid., 7).

14 Ibid., 6.

15 Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007); Lindbeck 2009; John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed., (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

16 For West, see, Carter, 2008, pp. 44-53; for Cone, ibid., pp. 157-194.

Patrick Cheng would classify as “liberation.”<sup>17</sup> Tanner’s core dogmatic works, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity* and *Christ the Key*, are likewise without substantial reference to queer or feminist forebears.<sup>18</sup>

The clue, for these theologians, is rather in their church engagement. When writing for a church audience, rather than the theological academy, their concerns are recognizably those of a left-liberal version of the liberation movements. Tanner’s most popularly-written work to date is *Economy of Grace*, a critique of capitalism substantially to the left of most pulpits but instantly usable in those that take it up.<sup>19</sup> Rogers was the major drafter of a widely-circulated report supporting same-sex marriage in the Episcopal Church.<sup>20</sup> In that light, I would suggest, a rereading of their formal theology will find that, while it never salutes the movement flag, it is trying, albeit in a liberal, individualized fashion, to advance versions of movement aims, in ways that only the movement made possible. It is quite easy to question their movement affiliation as such, but not, I think, which side they are on.

A longer treatment of this theme might fruitfully examine the case of some of the left-wing postliberals here as well—Rowan Williams, Stanley Hauerwas, Graham Ward. It would have been easier, a decade ago, to make a case for those three as responsible in some way to liberation movements. Their use of their subsequent prominence, however, suggests to me that their commitment is of a different order.

No: If the work of liberation-touched mainstream scholars like those analyzed above is life-giving, it is because they have heard and responded deeply to the liberation critique. That is true, not mainly at the social-ethical level (is Coakley an activist?), but theologically. The core liberation-theological claim, the prophetic insight swathed in regalia, is that non-liberative dogmatics represents first of all a theological failure. Put positively, that claim means a more complete and truthful

17 Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way Into the Triune God*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999); Patrick Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*, (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 30-32. In regard to Cheng’s typology of queer theologies, Rogers strikes the present author as a clear example of the “relational” camp; Cheng’s own treatment uses Rogers briefly under the systematic rubric of creation (ibid., 66).

18 Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001); Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Ch. 6 of *Christ the Key* is framed as a response to feminist and womanist critiques of traditional cross-and-atonement doctrine, but those critiques are not given voice in the text. An opening footnote cites essays by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Dolores Williams, but does not quote them (247 n1). Subsequent references respond to “feminist and womanist theologians,” without naming them as individuals or indeed as distinct liberation movements (*passim*.)

19 Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005). The reference to pulpit utility is, admittedly, based on the present author’s own preaching.

20 Ellen T. Charry, ed., “Same-Sex Relationships in the Life of the Church.” Lent 2010. Online at [http://collegeforbishops.org/assets/1145/ss\\_document\\_final.pdf](http://collegeforbishops.org/assets/1145/ss_document_final.pdf). Rogers is named as one author in the liberals’ side of the report; the assumption of his major drafting is based on stylistic evidence. Willis Jenkins, Cynthia Kittredge, and Deirdre Good, co-authors, doubtless made very significant contributions, but are not given to Rogers’ distinctive lyrical flights.

Christian theology is possible only if theologians can hear the insights and voices of all God’s children.

As argued above, the constructive results have begun to bear out this claim. Where there is life, excitement, and intellectual creativity in theology today, it is either explicitly liberationist, or else responsible and responsive to liberation critique. Coakley’s systematic theology, the most hotly anticipated in a generation, would be impossible without her feminist forebears. Carter is critical of James Cone and Cornel West, but in informal settings he is devastating on John Milbank.<sup>21</sup> The dialogue between Tanner and Catherine Keller on creation *ex nihilo* is a model for how liberation-constructive and left-orthodox theologies can inform and strengthen one another.<sup>22</sup> Rogers’ work on marriage and the Trinity is even reaching the churches!

Liberation theology’s future, in part, is therefore to leaven the loaf of traditional dogmatics. It reopens cold cases by bringing new and needed evidence to bear. For subjects like the life of the Trinity or the resurrection body, Scripture is ambiguous, reason stupefied, and tradition cautious or useless. Apophasis is our friend, but liberation makes a cataphatic approach possible too. We have more bodies and souls to learn from than ever before. Not all are called as prophets, but non-liberation theology has no future without liberation. That work of God is not identical with the historical movement of liberation theology, but to seek the former while ignoring the latter seems obviously shortsighted.

All Christian theology worthy of its Namesake should liberate, including that not easily named as liberation theology. Liberation is a work of the Holy Spirit, made evident in human lives—which is to say, it is a matter of fact. More tententiously: Theology liberates when God elects it to liberate. That reality does not make us irresponsible. We as theologians are called “to break every yoke”; and if we fail to do so, we fail at the task of theology. Nevertheless, that success or failure is, in certain important respects, out of our hands. It is not ours to determine. We are judged—we are all judged—by those who can tell whether the people are freer today than yesterday. We cannot guarantee the liberating character of our work by method. As theologians, we are subject not only to God, but on earth, to the prophets and the wise.

21 For Carter on West and Cone, see Carter 2008, chs. 1 and 4. For Milbank, see J. Kameron Carter, “Towards a Political Theology of the Visual: On Mondazin’s Book (with a Digression on John Milbank),” weblog entry, 2 October, 2010, online at <http://jkameroncarter.com/?p=474>.

22 Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*, (London: Routledge, 2003), 245 n72.