

THE POSTMODERN CHALLENGE TO LIBERAL THEOLOGY

Greenfield Group, December 2003

Paul Rasor

PART II: POSTMODERNITY AND LIBERAL THEOLOGY

What, then, is our postmodern condition? And what are its implications for theology, especially liberal theology? What theological challenges do we face, and what opportunities? These are the questions I will explore in this part.

I will begin with an overview of the main characteristics of postmodernity. This will serve as a counterpart to my discussion of modernity in Part I, and also set the stage for a survey of the primary postmodern theological options available to us, and how liberalism may draw on or otherwise relate to them. I will conclude this part with an analysis of some of the issues facing liberalism in light of our postmodern circumstances, and some suggestions for where we might go. This will also prepare the more reflective discussion in Part III.

The Character of Postmodernity

As was the case with modernity, there is a wide range of understandings of postmodernity. The term “postmodern” is used in different ways and in many different contexts. It appears in fields such as art, literature, political theory, philosophy, and religion; and it is understood somewhat differently in each area. In its most general sense, “the concept of postmodernity ... alerts us to some tremendously important social as well as cultural shifts taking place at the end of the twentieth century.”¹ We might think of it as a kind of symbol for a range of critiques and challenges to modernity in general and liberalism in particular.

¹ David Lyon, *Postmodernity* 2nd ed. (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 1.

In another sense, both modernity and postmodernity are simply ways of looking at the world, large-scale interpretive frameworks within which we orient ourselves and come to understand our life experiences. The same is true for any large-scale worldview, be it Christianity, capitalism, Buddhism, or Marxism. It has wisely been said: “Be careful how you interpret the world; it *is* like that.”² The point is that the world looks very different through postmodern glasses than through modern glasses. So in addition to asking whether the postmodern view offers a more accurate picture of reality, we might also ask whether it offers a more helpful way of perceiving ourselves and our situation than the modern view.

As with modernity, I have again found it helpful to distinguish between the philosophical discourse of postmodernity, on the one hand, and the social and material conditions of postmodern life, on the other. These naturally overlap, but for purposes of understanding their relationship to liberal theology, it will be helpful to think of them separately. In addition, just as I noted a certain liberal mind-set that emerged out of modernity, so too there is a certain postmodern sensibility that can help our understanding of the more formal characteristics of postmodernity. Accordingly, I will begin there.

The Postmodern Sensibility

Trying to make sense of the postmodern sensibility is a somewhat risky undertaking. As Paul Lakeland notes, we are still in the midst of it all, and things that may be perceived as negative for some may be positive for others. Further, as in modernity, to the extent that postmodernity is now part of our social and cultural context, the postmodern sensibility is something we all carry with us as part of our presupposed worldview. It is therefore very hard to

² Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis, Fortress 2001), 181, quoting German philosopher Erich Heller.

step back from and name. With these caveats, then, let us examine Lakeland's description of the postmodern sensibility:

The postmodern sensibility, let me suggest, is nonsequential, noneschatological, nonutopian, nonsystematic, nonfoundational, and, ultimately, nonpolitical. The postmodern human being wants a lot but expects a little. The emotional range is narrow, between mild depression at one end and a whimsical insouciance at the other. Postmodern heroes and heroines are safe, so far beyond that we could not possibly emulate them, avatars of power or success or money or sex – all without consequences. Who really expects to be like Arnold Schwarzenegger – probably the best-known and highest-paid actor in the world – or Madonna? Postmodernity may be tragic, but its denizens are unable to recognize tragedy. The shows we watch, the movies we see, the music we hear, all are devoted to a counterfactual presentation of life as comic, sentimental, and comfortable. Reality doesn't sell. So here we stand at the end of the twentieth century, a century that has seen two world wars, countless holocausts, the end of the myth of progress, and the near-death of hope, playing our computer games and whiling away the time with the toys that material success brings.³

From the perspective of a liberal-progressive religionist seeking to be involved in the world, this assessment appears basically negative. Yet there also are positive sides of these phenomena. First, difference and otherness are held up as positive values. This is in line with the tolerance and support for diversity liberalism has long affirmed. Second, while grand idealistic visions have disappeared, there is room for focusing “a more limited but achievable attention to local initiatives.” In other words, “the postmodern can be both trivial and substantial at the same time ... The difference, again, seems to be that postmodernity's nose, unlike that of modernity, is not put out of joint by the realization that what can be achieved is really quite limited.”⁴ Lyon, too, sees an affirmative side of the postmodern sensibility. While the popular perception is that the postmodern approach is characterized by skepticism, meaninglessness, and malaise, Lyon notes that “affirmative postmodernists, while they may share some of the skeptics'

³ Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 8-9.

⁴ Lakeland, 9.

critique of modernity, do not ‘shy away from affirming an ethic, making normative choices, and striving to build issue-specific political coalitions.’”⁵

Lakeland’s description of the postmodern sensibility is nuanced in his recognition of three different postmodern personality types. These scheme is surely an overly simplified account. As Lyon cautions, “a spectrum of positions is possible, and it is not necessary to take sides.”⁶ Yet Lakeland’s scheme is helpful in one important way for our purposes: his three types nicely match up with three of the four theological responses to postmodernity I will discuss below. Therefore, it is worth summarizing them here. Of course it would be unwise to equate personality type with theology, yet the similarities are sometimes striking.

Lakeland’s first type is what he calls “the obvious,” those who are simultaneously “the product and consumer of popular postmodern culture.”⁷ This is the culture of talk shows, tabloid newspapers, gossip columns, celebrity fan magazines, professional wrestling, so-called “reality TV,” and the like. It includes celebrities whose only product is their own celebrity – people like Zsa Zsa Gabor in an earlier generation, and perhaps Anna Nichole Smith or Pamela Anderson today. It also includes the public who follow and even admire them. As Lakeland describes this group, “they all seem to survive, nay thrive, on a cultural diet whose nutritional equivalent is sugar and preservatives.”⁸ We tend to see these sorts of people in negative terms, but from a postmodern perspective it is worth remembering that they are basically amoral, not immoral. They live without a real identity or meaning structure of their own, and even without any

⁵ David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2000), 54, quoting Princeton sociologist Pauline Rosenau.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁷ Lakeland, 9-10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

apparent need for meaning. People in this group are unlikely to become involved in religion or politics or movements for social change.

Lakeland's second group is what I will call the reactionaries. For this group, "modernity is the enemy, defined as a mix of liberalism, moral relativism, and 'secular humanism.' These individuals are at one and the same time postmodern and premodern." They make use of the tools and products of the contemporary culture, including especially its sophisticated communication and information technologies, yet they "hark back to a premodern world for their basic values."⁹ In religious and political terms, several different perspectives may be included within this group, including fundamentalists, neoconservatives, and so-called postliberals. For them, modernity is the enemy, and postmodernity simply represents a further corruption or degeneration of a process that started with the Enlightenment. These are people who never quite embraced the liberal modern culture in the first place, and who now are engaged in a kind of rear-guard action to maintain an older set of culture values.

To describe Lakeland's third type, I use the term "engaged postmodernists" or "critical participants." These are people who know they live within a postmodern situation, accept it, and take it seriously by challenging those aspects of the new cultural reality that present difficulties. These are religious workers and human rights workers and peace activists – people who know that they can't solve all the problems of the world but still work on those they can. They recognize that there are no guarantees that we will ever reach the right outcome, or even that we can know from our limited perspectives what that outcome is, but nevertheless do the best they can to relieve suffering and create a more humane and just world. In contrast to the

⁹ Ibid., 11.

reactionaries, they look forward to a better future rather than backward to a better past. And unlike those in the first group, they are engaged, not disengaged. As Lakeland says, “they are critically present in and to their postmodern world.”¹⁰

The Philosophical Discourse of Postmodernity

With this discussion of the postmodern personality as a backdrop, then, let me now turn to postmodernity itself. As with modernity, despite the variety of understandings, there is general agreement about postmodernity’s central philosophical and cultural characteristics. For purposes of this discussion, I will focus on the following five distinct but related themes: (1) disorientation or fragmentation; (2) the collapse of metanarratives; (3) the loss of foundations in epistemology; (4) the “linguistic turn” in philosophy; and (5) the collapse of boundaries.

Disorientation; fragmentation. Most discussions of postmodernity emphasize in some way the problem of disorientation or fragmentation or loss of meaning. This is a kind of running theme, and it might be helpful to think of the other characteristics as expressing this idea in various ways. The basic idea is that the postmodern world is fragmented. “Whereas the modern world tended ... to be held together by the routines and rules of the industrial work world and the bureaucracy of the nation state, a sense of disintegration has set in as both time and space are in flux.”¹¹ In postmodernity there are no central signposts or clear structures, so it is much harder to find meaning and purpose. Everything is relative. At the same time, however, the postmodern view celebrates pluralism and diversity. Things can’t be unified into a meaningful whole, but no one expects them to be. This is of course a challenge to the idea of universals that was affirmed by the Enlightenment.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Lyon, *Jesus*, 12.

The collapse of metanarratives. The central idea here is that the traditional mythologies, the large-scale stories and interpretive frameworks that we have used to orient our lives, are becoming less and less credible. Most people once believed that history had a clear direction and purpose, for example. And whole cultures basically shared a view of what that was. Or to put it in religious terms, they believed in things like ultimate salvation according to a divine plan. During and following the Enlightenment, people had come to have a basic confidence in the ability of science and technology to move forward. Postmodernity changes all this. It distrusts any sort of unifying story of our lives or our history, and any kind of grand theory that might explain things, whether it is the idea of God's plan, or the Marxist view of history moving toward a certain kind of social structure, or the evolutionary view of life as continually improving on itself. As Lyon notes, rather than universal reason we have a set of discourses, and "each form of discourse is forced to generate what home-made authority it can."¹²

Giddens refers to this phenomenon as the "disappearance of historical teleology."¹³ We still use knowledge of the past as a means of orienting ourselves toward the future, but the future is now regarded as open-ended, to be determined by courses of action undertaken in the present. Progress and other providential views of history are no longer viable. As Lyon puts it, "modernity is going nowhere."¹⁴ Or perhaps it is better to say that it is going nowhere in particular. In the postmodern world, we are no longer sure that we are moving forward, or even what "forward" means.

¹² Lyon, *Postmodernity*, 17.

¹³ Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 52.

¹⁴ Lyon, *Postmodernity*, 91.

The loss of foundations in epistemology. This theme signals the end of the possibility of certainty. In the postmodern world, there is no such thing as certain knowledge or ultimate truth. In technical philosophical terms, we speak of the loss of epistemological foundations. Reason, which modernity thought could ground our truth-seeking, turns out not to be as objective or universal as we thought. Things we once thought gave us firm foundations, such as human reason, or common experience, are bounded by language and culture and gender. Everything is relativized. What we used to think of as truth is now seen as interpretation. And because of our cultural limitations, all our interpretations are only partial. It's not just that each of us can only have a partial view of some larger truth. Think of the metaphors we commonly use, such as looking at the same light through different windows, or going up the same mountain on different paths. These are all challenged in postmodernity. In the postmodern way of thinking, there is no larger truth. We're all wandering around on different paths (or lost in the brush) on different mountains. All truths are partial and conditioned.

This condition leaves us with more to decide but fewer bases for decision. "As less and less can be taken as given, so more and more responsibility is placed on the individual to account for, and act in, the world."¹⁵ This lack of guidance is felt not only at the level of individual life choices, but perhaps more importantly for religious liberals, we are left potentially without a reference point for our prophetic voice. As Lyon recognizes, a central postmodern dilemma is how we can find "authentic post-foundational starting points for social criticism." Lyon continues:

The postmodern context, with its emphasis on individual choice and consumer preferences, when mixed with epistemological doubt and pluralism, creates a

¹⁵ Lyon, *Jesus*, 42.

heady cocktail that seems quickly to befuddle and paralyze. At best, only local rationales, or subgroup standpoints seem available as means of discernment and choice. It is hard to see how any (post)modern society can in any sense become a desirable habitat without coming to terms with this.¹⁶

This is a critical issue for liberal theology, one I will return to in Part III.

The “linguistic turn” in philosophy. The “linguistic turn” begins with Wittgenstein. Philosophers talk about this as one of the key developments of the 20th century, on a par with the “turn to the subject” during the Enlightenment. The main idea here is that our beliefs and experiences are always mediated through our culture and language. For example, when we have an experience of God, we experience it that way only because the word “God” and some basic idea of what that word might mean are already available to us. There is no such thing as uninterpreted experience. The idea of “direct experience” of mystery and wonder, from the Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes, would have to be understood as “linguistically and culturally mediated experience of something we have been taught to interpret by means of the word/symbol ‘mystery’ or ‘wonder.’”

The linguistic turn challenges key liberal ideas such as individual autonomy, since it means that there can be no individual self apart from culture and language. It also challenges all ideas of universal truth or universal reason. All of our ideas are now seen as largely determined by culture, and even by our specific location within a particular culture. In the modern world, I could think of my own experiences and ideas as universally shared among all human beings. But in the postmodern world, I realize that they are nothing more than the ideas and experiences of a straight, white, middle aged, highly educated urban male in early 21st century America. This is of course one of the important lessons of feminist thought.

¹⁶ Lyon, *Postmodernity*, 80.

Breakdown of boundaries. Postmodern thinking tends to dissolve boundaries between categories we used to think of as clear. One of the most interesting examples is that we are less sure of the difference between what is serious and what is frivolous. The postmodern way of looking at the world tends to be more playful and to take things less seriously. This is evident in such things as manners. There is much less sense of decorum or appropriateness about dress and language than many of us remember a generation or two ago. Lyon captures this trend when he notes that “in everyday life, the postmodern may be seen in the blurring of boundaries between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture.”¹⁷ The traditional categories and distinctions are simply irrelevant. In manners, music, and other cultural areas, collage is the style of the times. This is evident in religion, too:

Beliefs and practices that once were sealed within an institutional form now flow freely over formerly policed boundaries. Syncretism ... is now generalized and popularized, in practice as in belief. New possibilities emerge, creating liturgical smorgasbords, doctrinal potlucks. As the sacred canopy recedes and the floating signs multiply, the problem becomes less ‘how do I conform?’ and more ‘how do I choose?’¹⁸

Even reality itself is in question. Artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and other developments blur the lines between reality and virtual reality. In shopping malls, the distinction between inside and outside, day and night, natural and artificial have (virtually) disappeared. The mall also erases the once clear division between economic activity and leisure time activity.

More importantly, our moral and ethical categories are also affected. The difference between good and bad or even between right and wrong is no longer as clear as it once was.

¹⁷ Ibid., 10.

¹⁸ Lyon, *Jesus*, 43.

This is one of the effects of the postmodern tendency to avoid universal standards of morality.

The debate among feminist thinkers over the issue of female circumcision or genital mutilation is a telling case in point. Many argued that this practice was dehumanizing and oppressive and must therefore be resisted. But others argued, or at least worried, that to say it is wrong is to impose our own cultural values on others, and that we shouldn't presume to do this. This kind of issue shows why this debate matters. In the larger context, the postmodern view is not just a lowering of standards, as many people think; it's a deeper distrust of our ability even to have standards at all.

Social Characteristics of Postmodernity

As was the case for modernity, in addition to the philosophical discourse which highlights the developments discussed above, postmodernity also carries a set of social and material characteristics that distinguish it in important ways from the modernity that preceded it. These, too, have important implications for theology: they represent the social conditions theology must address and respond to. While different commentators emphasize different social conditions, all agree that these two conditions are critical: (1) a new form of consumerism, and (2) the development of new communication and information technologies. A brief examination of these developments will help our understanding of some of the theological challenges we face in postmodernity.

Neither of these is completely new. The centrality of consumption as the driving force behind modern market capitalism, and the promise of continued progress in technology, were prominent modernist themes from the beginning. Yet in postmodernity, both have become

wildly exaggerated. And both are “bound up with the restructuring of capitalism that has been underway since at least the last quarter of the twentieth century.”¹⁹

Consumerism. Looking first at consumerism, let me begin with an observation of David Lyon:

If postmodernity means anything, it means the consumer society. If this position is correct, much has indeed changed, and it seems to add up to an unprecedented social condition. Indeed, even consumer *society* is a misnomer, unless by it we refer to something well beyond the conventional bounds of the nation state. Consumerism is global, not in the sense that all may consume, but in the sense that all are affected by it.²⁰

In postmodernity, consumption has become central. Our economy is no longer based on the production of goods and services, but rather on the production of demand. Everything, including religion and morality, meaning and truth, becomes a commodity to be shopped for. As Lyon notes, this development is “bad news for ‘authoritative’ pronouncements from academic, religious or political sources.”²¹ But the issue is broader than this. Because everything is perceived in terms of consumer choice, consumer shopping skills are needed not just for products, but also for education, health care, religious affiliation, and politics. As consumer choice becomes the normative social process, the “market culture displaces citizenship with consumership.”²² Indeed, theologian Walter Wink has observed that “consumerism has become the only universally available mode of participation in modern society.”²³ I believe that one of the more serious consequences of this shift is that in this new social reality, the direction of

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁰ Lyon, *Postmodernity*, 88.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

²² Lyon, *Jesus*, 12.

²³ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 54. While Wink uses the term “modern,” he is clearly thinking in terms of contemporary society, not modernity as I have used it in this paper.

responsibility and accountability is reversed. As citizens, as members of a community, we are responsible to the whole. As consumers, the community becomes responsible to us. We come to think of ourselves as having a “right” to have our consumer wants satisfied.

Another consequence of this postmodern consumer culture is that style and image become more important than utility and function. Goods are no longer about filling real needs. They become symbols – of status, identity, or class – responding to artificially created desires masquerading as needs. Images and product logos are themselves consumer items. While treatment of the role of television is all this is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that the postmodern consumer culture is inherently wrapped up in television advertising, and especially the marketing of images through television. Finally, the priority of images means that even identity is now a consumer product. Personal identities “are constructed through consuming. Forget the idea that who we are is given by God or achieved through hard work in a calling or career; we shape our malleable image by what we buy – our clothing, our kitchens, and our cars tell the story of who we are (becoming).”²⁴

Communication and information technologies. The second defining social condition of postmodernity is the rise of new forms of communication and information technologies, or “CITs.” This development precedes the era we now refer to as postmodernity, although, as with consumerism, it has accelerated in postmodern times. Lyon observes that the growth of these technologies “is one of the most striking and transformative changes of the twentieth century. They do not in themselves transform anything, but they contribute to the establishment of novel contexts of social interaction.”²⁵ For purposes of the theological orientation of this paper,

²⁴ Lyon, *Jesus*, 12.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

perhaps the most important feature of these new technologies is that they have led to the emergence of new social structures built around networks. The concept of the “network society” has become common. This represents a significant change from older forms of organization that were built around stable, or relatively stable, institutions or associations, and often connected with a particular location. The network society is dynamic, decentralized, and often globalized. *Flows* replace *spaces* as the locus of decision and involvement. Once again, important questions are raised for meaning and identity:

The network society cannot provide stable meanings and sources of identity, which once were related to associations (including churches), political parties, nation states, or local communities. So personal and communal identities become centrally important as sources of meaning, either ... proactively pulling towards a better future – feminism, environmentalism – or reactively harking back to a preferred past, related to God, family, ethnicity, family, locality.”²⁶

This suggests that the role of voluntary associations may be diminishing in postmodern society. This has particular significance for religious liberals, partly because of James Luther Adams’ emphasis on these kinds of associations in social justice work. In light of this analysis, we can now see that Adams’ thought is clearly a product of modernity. This is not to say that it is passé; indeed, it may well be that we need more associations, although perhaps of a somewhat different kind. Yet perhaps our challenge today is not to build (only) voluntary associations and institutions, but to create communities that can help us find meaningful identities. Of course if these are to have lasting impact, they need to become ongoing “associations” as well. And they need to enable us to get engaged, and not just allow us to retreat into a safe comfort zone. What we need are *communities of identity and engagement*.

Theological Responses to Postmodernity

²⁶ Ibid., 38.

What sort of theology is possible within a postmodern framework? What shape might a postmodern liberal theology take? Is such a thing possible at all, or is “postmodern liberalism” an oxymoron? These are important questions as we move into the third century of the liberal theological tradition.

In trying to come to grips with the various theological options being offered in today’s postmodern climate, we are helped considerably by several recent analyses which attempt to classify them into some sort of meaningful scheme. These efforts have been undertaken from a variety of perspectives; theologians, sociologists, even psychologists examining faith development have all made offerings. Some are more successful, or at least more helpful, than others. Yet while their actual categories differ somewhat, most are strikingly similar in their basic shapes. Taking these various typologies together, I have found it useful to think of four basic types of theological responses to the postmodern situation. These are (1) radical postmodern or deconstructionist theologies; (2) late modern or pragmatic theologies; (3) premodern or countermodern theologies; and (4) liberation theologies.²⁷

My own sense is that if a viable postmodern liberal theology is to survive, it will probably fit into the second of these categories. But it will also have to take into account some of the lessons and critiques of the third and fourth types. And it will be a different liberalism from that of the past. In a telling introductory comment to his typology, Lakeland notes that postmodern theologies lie between two extremes: old-style liberalism, which dissolves the

²⁷ My primary sources here include Lakeland and Lyon, *Postmodernity*, as well as Terrance W. Tilley, *Postmodern Theologies: The Challenge of Religious Diversity* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), and James W. Fowler, *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

specifics of the Christian tradition by means of “a thorough accommodation to the world,” on the one hand, and fideisms, which reject reason altogether, on the other.²⁸

Radical Postmodern or Deconstructionist Theologies

This group seems to exist primarily within the academic community. Lakeland quips that this is the theological camp “with the fewest tents.”²⁹ Thinkers in this group accept the basic framework of postmodernity that I have discussed. They more or less assume that modernity has run its course, and good riddance. Their program is to deconstruct the structures of modernism by showing that all of its ideas and assumptions are incoherent or circular and self-referential. They typically incorporate into their work most of the postmodern themes discussed above: ideas we take as fundamental or self-evident are really contingent and relative; nothing is fixed; there are no sure reference points; everything we take to be “fact” is instead merely “interpretation.” This approach represents a wholesale attack on all ideas of religious truth, including the idea of God. Many deconstructionists also seek to reveal and challenge the hidden dimensions of power that shape our ways of thinking, often without our being aware of them. Writers in this group tend to see claims of truth as basically nothing more than legitimized power.

My observation is that most of the theologians who work from this perspective eventually give up the possibility of doing theology altogether, although they may continue to be interested in the role of religion in contemporary society. This is true of Sharon Welch, for example, who has moved from an attempt to articulate “a feminist theology of liberation” in her

²⁸ Lakeland, 41.

²⁹ Ibid., 42.

first book,³⁰ to a “postmodern humanism” that celebrates “ethics without virtue, and spirituality without God” in her most recent.³¹ On the other hand, I believe that Welch’s recent work is theological in the broad sense of this term. And I would locate her in group four within this typology, despite her own self-understanding that seems to prefer group one.

Late Modern or Pragmatic Theologies

In general terms, theologians in this group want to continue the basic project of modernity, but now from a highly critical perspective. They are aware of the negative consequences of modernity, and they accept most postmodern themes such as relativity, the problem of grand narratives, the role of language, the mistrust of autonomous subjectivity, and so on. But they still see possibilities for meaning, for finding meaningful reference points that allow us to locate ourselves in the universe and offer a basis for morality. They accept the inability to locate any sort of universal truth, but for them, this doesn’t mean that there are no meaningful ideas or truths. They still look for some forms of large-scale narratives, but these now tend to be rather thin. Sallie McFague, for example, has suggested the idea of the common creation story as a way of linking us all together. They accept the fact that our frameworks of meaning are human constructions, but they think these still give us meaning or orientation, and that this sort of construction is our principal theological task. This is a central theme in the work of Gordon Kaufman, one of the leading liberal theologians today. Lakeland calls this group “soft-core postmoderns.”³²

³⁰ Sharon D. Welch, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985).

³¹ Sharon D. Welch, *Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work* (New York: Routledge, 1999), xix.

³² Lakeland, 43.

In many ways, this group continues the tradition of liberal theology. Indeed, many of its representative figures, such as Sallie McFague, Gordon Kaufman, and David Tracy, are commonly understood today as leading liberal theologians. This does not mean that they all approach theology the same way; there are wide differences in their methodologies and their understandings of central theological categories such as God and the church. But they share a commitment to deep engagement with the culture, and, like older liberal theologies, their work draws on contemporary developments in philosophy and the sciences. In this sense, they continue the typical mediating stance of liberalism. Lakeland argues that this mediating approach makes their faith less secure, especially in a postmodern context: “Their engagement with postmodern thought is genuine, which renders their faith more fragile than that of the nostalgics. Their preservation of hope in the postmodern world is a counter-factual commitment to transcendence; thus they are more vulnerable even than the radicals.”³³ Of course the insecurity of religious faith is simply another recurring tension within liberalism.

Premodern or Countermodern Theologies

This group, whom Lakeland also refers to as “nostalgics,” lies at the opposite end of the spectrum from the radical postmoderns in group one. In general terms, most of the theologians in this group are highly critical of modernity, and so of the liberalism that goes along with it. But they are also often highly critical of postmodern culture, especially the loss of any basis for meaning. In many ways, members of this group want to go back to a kind of harmony or security they see as having existed before modernity arose. Modernity destroyed this harmony, and postmodernity is simply pointing out the inherent weaknesses of modernity that are now

³³ Ibid., 43-44.

apparent. It is important to note that the theologians in this group are not fundamentalists.

“They are, rather, theologians who are frequently fully conversant with the products of both modern and postmodern thought, secular and religious, consciously ‘writing against’” it.³⁴

Both Lakeland and Lyon distinguish two sub-types of contemporary theology within this group. One is “postliberal” theology, represented most prominently by George Lindbeck; the other is the “countermodern” theology or “radical orthodoxy” of Anglican theologian John Milbank. A third sub-type within this group, not treated by either Lakeland or Lyon, is the narrative or communal approach represented by theological ethicist Stanley Hauerwas.³⁵ It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze these theologies in detail or to compare the respective approaches. Yet many of these “premodern” theologies offer important insight and critiques that are useful to liberal theology and are therefore worth taking seriously. I therefore engage one of them, Lindbeck’s postliberal theology, in more detail in the next section, below.

Liberation Theologies

Liberation theology is an umbrella term that includes several different theological perspectives. As with the other types, this paper is not the place to address these variations. But all liberation perspectives share two central commitments. This first is their emphasis on exposing and overcoming the causes of oppression. This commitment arises out of a practice of solidarity with the victims of oppression, and it is often stated in terms of human suffering:

“Liberation and political theologies engage postmodern experience directly at the point of suffering and theodicy.”³⁶ The second commitment is to *praxis*, again often expressed in terms

³⁴ Ibid., 43.

³⁵ See Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

³⁶ Fowler, 183.

of a *praxis* of identification with those on the “underside” of history. “theology in dialogue with people on the underside of history must take into account more specifically the experience of brokenness and of separation from God as well.”³⁷ Another way to say this is that liberation theology’s starting point is the actual, lived experience of oppression and suffering in the world.

Tilley, in his typology of postmodern theologies, calls this category “theologies of communal praxis.” This description highlights another central dimension of liberation perspectives, namely the practices that make up the ongoing life of the religious community. Again, the concern here is not simply with the usual elements of liturgy and worship, although these are also relevant. More importantly, however, liberation theology speaks from the perspective of a particular community or experience of oppression, such as being poor in Latin America or being black in white America. As in all postmodern approaches, it does not try to universalize its own experience by speaking for everyone. At the same time, experience always has a collective or group reference; it never refers simply to individual experience. In this sense, it is quite different than the traditional liberal emphasis on the individual.

Finally, I want to comment briefly on liberation theology’s use of reason. Like the theologies of the other three types, sound analysis and careful reasoning are critical. Liberation analyses of the systemic causes of oppression are often very sophisticated, and they draw regularly on other disciplines such as economics, sociology, and political theory. In this, they are much like the liberals represented in the second type. But the goal of liberation analysis is less conceptual clarity than social change. Liberation theologians rarely worry about whether their theological understandings of symbol categories such as God, humanity and world are in

³⁷ Joerg Rieger, *Remember the Poor: The Challenge to Theology in the Twenty-First Century* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1998), 17.

line with contemporary thought in philosophy and the natural sciences. Instead, liberation theology's criteria are more explicitly pragmatic: Theology is "true" if it is liberating, if it leads to liberating *praxis* in the world.

Of the four theological responses to the challenge of postmodernity summarized here, only the second and fourth represent options likely to be attractive to liberals. As I noted above, the second or "late modern" option is where liberal theology ordinarily finds itself. The fourth option, liberation theology, is also appealing to many liberals. This makes sense, because liberation theology is concerned with things that religious liberals are also concerned with, such as overcoming oppression and working toward greater justice in the world. It is worth remembering, however, that liberation theology is not part of the liberal tradition, but instead operates as a profound critique of religious liberalism. I will turn now to a consideration of some of the lessons that two of these postmodern theological options, the postliberal and the liberation, might have to teach us.

Postmodern Critiques of Liberal Theology

I want to engage these critiques from the perspective of two specific crises I see in liberal religion today. The first is what I will call an "identity" crisis; the second I will call a "prophetic" or "justice" crisis. Both emerge out of the ongoing tension in liberal theology involving its relationship to society and the larger culture, a tension I described in Part I. Without repeating that discussion here, I will simply summarize by noting that liberalism has always been accommodating and accepting of culture. These two liberal tendencies, the accommodating and the prophetic, exist in a certain tension with each other.

The two crises I have identified can be clarified by engaging the critiques of liberal theology offered by the two postmodern theologies I have named, one, in effect, from the right, and the other from the left. At the simplest level, the identity crisis has to do with the problem of being able to say just who we are, religiously and theologically. This is a familiar problem for religious liberals; it is part of the price we pay for our historic commitment to tolerance and freedom from external authority. But at a deeper level, this identity issue is related to the liberal accommodation of religion and culture. By adapting ourselves to the larger culture, we constantly run the risk of losing our distinctly “religious” identity. This issue is brought into sharper focus by the postliberal critique.

The justice or prophetic crisis, on the other hand, is clarified by the liberation critique. The basic charge is that the liberal response to social issues is often inadequate or ineffective. This challenge is also related to liberal theology’s connection to culture. As H. Richard Niebuhr recognized long ago, the easy accommodation of religion and culture tends to produce a certain level of intellectual and social comfort. The result is that religious liberals tend to be reformers, not revolutionaries.

The Critique from the Right: Postliberal Theology

George Lindbeck, the central figure in the postliberal movement, begins by laying out his understanding of the nature of religion, drawing on several common postmodern themes. For Lindbeck, religion is a “cultural-linguistic” phenomenon that provides us with a large-scale framework that enables us to organize our experience by giving us a set of interpretive reference points. Now this may sound like the old Enlightenment idea of a universal metanarrative. But from the postliberal perspective, this framework always exists within particular historical

communities and traditions. From this perspective, to be religious does not mean to hold certain kinds of beliefs, or to have particular kinds of experiences. To be religious is to internalize a specific tradition and live by reference to its particular framework of meaning. The theological task, then, is to “give a normative explication of the meaning a religion has for its adherents.”³⁸ This is basically a descriptive task, and theology is to be evaluated by how faithfully it adheres to its own narrative tradition. As Lindbeck himself notes, this approach tends to “result in conservative stances,”³⁹ although it need not necessarily do so.

In order to see how this perspective becomes a critique of liberal theology, we need to examine what Lindbeck calls the “experiential-expressive” view of religion. This represents the liberal view, and it has been the dominant view of modernity. According to this view, religion is grounded in certain pre-conscious or unmediated forms of human experience. Schleiermacher’s notion of a “feeling of absolute dependence” is perhaps the earliest expression of this view,⁴⁰ although it has antecedents in 18th century natural theology and in 17th century pietism. Twentieth century examples include William James’ famous definition of religion as the feeling of apprehending oneself as being in relation to the divine,⁴¹ and John Dewey’s understanding of “the religious” as a particular quality of experience. Our Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes reflect this basic perspective when they name “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder” as the first among the sources of our faith. In this view, religion is seen as internalized, or located primarily within the individual human subject. This experiential

³⁸ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 113.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁴⁰ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* 2nd ed. [1830], ed. H. R. Macintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), § 4.

⁴¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* [1902] (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 31.

understanding of religion, in other words, is based on the philosophy of subjectivity that became prominent in modernity.

Lindbeck rejects this experience-based view of religion, along with the liberal theology it produces, in part, because it fails to recognize its own cultural and historical location. It is not universal, as liberals have traditionally liked to claim; instead it simply reflects a particular view of the human subject that has come to dominate Western thinking during the past two or three centuries. At a deeper level, Lindbeck challenges the primacy of religious experience itself. Instead, his “cultural-linguistic” view of religion, as he calls it, reverses the priority and holds that all experience, including religious experience, has meaning only in terms of the cultural and linguistic framework in which it is embedded. Here, we see the influence of the postmodern linguistic turn discussed above. Finally, Lindbeck’s view challenges the traditional liberal understanding of the self as an autonomous, rational being who can develop most fully only if freed from the bondage of external authority. Lindbeck’s approach again reverses the liberal priority by making the community primary and seeing the self not as autonomous, but only in relation to the communal context.

Lakeland, in his analysis of postliberal theology, notes that “the fundamental motivation for postliberal theology is to stem and reverse the tide of theological liberalism.” For Lindbeck and other postliberals, liberalism threatens a loss of identity by undermining Christianity’s particularity. By identifying religion with feeling, and by its mediating tactics that rely on philosophical, psychological, and social-science models, liberal theology “empties out the specificity of the tradition and substitutes a vapid lowest common denominator. In the end, all

religions become forms of enjoining the golden rule.”⁴² In a sense, then, postliberalism turns to the tradition as a basis for a “constructive critique that relativizes both modernity and postmodernity.”⁴³

It is precisely in Lindbeck’s emphasis on tradition that I think it has something to offer for liberalism. The Enlightenment’s rejection of all external authority, especially the church, has led to a tendency among liberals today to downplay the value of tradition as a resource for theology. Of course freedom from the strictures of the past is liberating, and no religious liberal would likely advocate a return to old authoritarian frameworks. I also think it would be a mistake for liberal theology to follow Lindbeck’s inward orientation that tends to insulate the tradition from critique and isolate it from engagement with the larger society. I am concerned, however, with a particular tendency I see among religious liberals today: Many resist seeing themselves as part of an ongoing, living tradition for fear of losing their sense of independence. This fear is based on a false understanding of the self, and it significantly contributes to the identity crisis I identified above.

The Critique from the Left: Liberation Theology

While any number of issues could be raised in regard to liberation theology’s critique of liberalism, I will limit my comments to the challenge to the liberal-modern conception of the human self and its related implications for the issue of social class. In liberation theology, the self is constituted not by any quality of rationality or subjective experience, but by a way of living in the world, including responsible action in community. The subject is not the autonomous rational skeptic, but the believing poor person, the person whose autonomy is

⁴² Lakeland, 65.

⁴³ Lyon, *Postmodernity*, 108.

limited by social and economic circumstances of oppression. This is a key to liberation theology's goal of overcoming oppression. As Rebecca Chopp puts it, "it is only by reconceiving the human subject through praxis that we may respond to suffering."⁴⁴ This critique thus points to the social and class location of liberal theology. Liberation theology aligns itself with the poor and the oppressed, and tends to see liberal theology as aligned with the privileged middle classes, and therefore as primarily addressing their needs. Joerg Rieger comments that "the struggle of oppressed people for liberation cannot easily be identified with the modern self's struggle for autonomy."⁴⁵ Rebecca Chopp nicely captures this issue in her remark that from a liberation perspective, modern liberal theology "functions as an ideology for the bourgeois."⁴⁶

On a deeper level, individualism itself is linked to the issue of social class. This, of course, is not a new idea. More than seventy years ago, H. R. Niebuhr noted the link between denominationalism and social class in American religion. As Niebuhr saw it, middle class churches tend to emphasize individual self-consciousness, personal salvation, and financial security, as well as an ethic of individual responsibility.⁴⁷ At the same time, middle class religion is usually associated with the social and economic establishment, and as a result cannot engage problems of social justice at a deep level since overturning the existing system would be contrary to its own interests. And Sharon Welch has commented on the class ideology that lies

⁴⁴ Rebecca Chopp, *The Praxis of Suffering: An Interpretation of Liberation and Political Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), 122.

⁴⁵ Rieger, 18.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 26. See also Dorothee Sölle, *Thinking About God: An Introduction to Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1990), 17-18: "[Liberal] bourgeois theology is the work of the white middle class It takes no account of the impoverished masses of this earth; the starving appear at most as objects of charity."

⁴⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Holt, 1929), especially chapter four.

at the root of the “cultured despair of the middle class” that contributes to the abandonment of social justice work “when one is already the beneficiary of partial social change.”⁴⁸

Liberation theology thus calls for “class conversion.”⁴⁹ It tells us liberals that if we really want to work for justice in the world, we need to rethink our own identity as human beings and move toward an intersubjective solidarity with the oppressed. A liberating praxis calls not just for social action, but for a new way of being in the world, an engaged solidarity with the suffering and oppressed peoples of the world. In other words, a significant factor in the prophetic crisis I identified above is the lingering hold of the modern philosophy of subjectivity and its individualistic view of the self.

⁴⁸ Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 15.

⁴⁹ Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 26-27. The Latin American bishops have called poverty “institutionalized violence.” See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 23.