

Lecture Notes T-500
Postliberal Theology¹

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What do you do when you find yourself unable to ignore critiques from those your tradition has marginalized, yet you still find yourself claimed most radically by many of your tradition's "classic" expressions?

What do you do when those critical voices have opened your eyes to new ways of reading those classic expressions, so that you now find in them some of the most powerful resources imaginable for making common cause with others who refuse to take their marginalization for granted anymore?

What if you work from a position of privilege that you did not choose, but that you cannot simply set aside without denying your own identity, your own "somebodyness"?

Well, you have several options. You can become the kind of conversational theologian exemplified by David Tracy, Peter Hodgson, John Cobb or (in his kinder and gentler moments) Clark Williamson.

That is the route I tend to have followed, since, even though gay, I retain many privileges. Or you become a "postliberal," especially the kind of conversational postliberal that William Placher has become.

I have also found myself attracted to this route, but to qualify completely I would have to be less suspicious than I am of Aquinas, Calvin and Barth, and more suspicious than I am of Tillich and Whitehead.²

Etymologically speaking, you can guess that postliberalism has to mean something that arises *after* liberalism.

There is a sense in which all the influential twentieth century theologians have been postliberal.

As you should recall, every theological movement we have covered has been critical, in its own way, of nineteenth century liberalism's tendency to identify uncritically with bourgeois Western culture's myth of universal progress.

Each has been an attempt to move beyond that liberalism, *but*, except for some evangelicals (not all), none of these movements thinks it possible simply to turn back the clock.

All of them acknowledge some degree of indebtedness to early liberalism's defense of intellectual freedom in the church.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all page numbers refer to William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).

² For more about comparing postliberals and other approaches, see my essays, "Between Revisionists and Postliberals," *Encounter* 51 (1990):389-401; "Faith, Reason and Public Life: Are They Compatible?," *Encounter* 55 (1994):237-251.

None of them, for example, wants to control the questions and conclusions that Biblical scholars come up with, though many would insist that all scholars need to be more honest about the way their faith influences their results.

And many would question whether the work of a group like the Jesus Seminar has any direct relevance to the truth of the Gospel.

All that's been true of every theologian we've read at least from Barth onward, plus some evangelicals. And in that sense, to reiterate, all of them could be called postliberal, and so could most of you.

But since the 1980s, the term "postliberal" has been used almost exclusively to refer to a theological movement that began to take shape in the mid-1960s at Yale Divinity School and later found a second home at Duke Divinity School.

At Yale theologians like Hans Frei began to borrow some influential concepts from contemporary philosophy and literary criticism.

From philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein they began to appreciate how the context in which one says something decisively shapes the meaning of what's said.

From literary critics like Erich Auerbach they borrowed the crucial distinction between a myth and a "realistic narrative."

Let me briefly digress on that distinction between myth and realistic narrative: For Auerbach, a myth is a narrative whose main point is to illustrate some general truth; the identities of its characters are subordinate to the general truth the myth illustrates—the characters are little more than props on a stage.

A realistic narrative can also illustrate general truths, and it can be fictional, historical or a mixture of both, but here the main point is to present us with the irreplaceable personal identity of one or more characters.

Who the characters are is at least as important as any general truths their lives illustrate. Each character is "unsubstitutable," and the character's identity can't be detached from the narrative that presents it—in other words, the main point of the story can't be detached from the story itself.

A crucial assumption here is that there is a vast difference between "what" and "who." If you want to know *what* I am, all kinds of general statements might get you closer and closer to an accurate account. But if you want to know *who* I am, you have to see how all those general statements are uniquely embodied in my particular life, and that requires a realistic narrative.

Postliberals apply this concept of realistic narrative to the Bible as a whole and to the Gospels.

The main point of the Bible as a whole is not to illustrate general truths about God, though it may do that too, but to present us with God's "unsubstitutable" identity. Even though many of the stories may be fictional, their point is uniquely to identify a character who, in this case, is not considered fictional at all.

So even though you can know many things about what God is without ever encountering these stories, postliberals believe (at the very least) that you'll miss something crucial about *who* God is if you never engage these stories.

And part of the danger of missing that is that you may miss something crucial about who you are, because you may not yet appreciate how “who” can never be reduced to “what.”

The Gospels, especially the Synoptics, are also realistic narratives. As with the entire Bible, even though many episodes in the Gospels may be fictional, their point is to identify a character who is not considered fictional at all.

Their point is to tell us who Jesus of Nazareth is—the crucified first-century Jew whose past identity is inseparable from his risen presence here and now.

But their point is also to tell us who God is, and their distinctive claim is that to know who Jesus is *is* to know who God is.

Postliberals believe that these stories of Jesus bring God’s identity into focus in a way that no other stories, before or after, ever have. The story of Jesus is the story of God, not exhaustively, but (quite literally) crucially.

And because the Bible presents itself as a narrative about the one God who creates, sustains and redeems everything else, who embraces not just fictional worlds but all worlds, it demands that we join our realistic narratives about ourselves to its all-pervading narrative.

Here is where Placher and other postliberals are fond of quoting Auerbach’s observation that the Biblical narrative’s claim on us is a “tyrannical” claim that insists on absorbing our world into its narrated world (see pp. 101, 162).

With that kind of language, it’s no surprise that postliberals are all rather fond of Karl Barth. They believe that, whatever his shortcomings, Barth at least understood the utter radicality and audacity of the Biblical world’s claim on us.

But postliberals are not just Barthians. They all admire Barth, but they are all more mindful than Barth seemed to be about their own social location, and about the dangers of making universal claims.

In other words, postliberals have learned to appreciate what we’ve been calling the new scandal of particularity: however “unsubstitutable” the Biblical narratives are, however much they may insist on permeating our world, they cannot do so in a way that denies the “unsubstitutability” of our own stories, and the stories of our communities.

Serene Jones, you should remember, has at least one foot in the postliberal camp, and her “strategic essentialism” is as indebted to postliberal thought as it is to feminist theory. Cornel West, the best-selling African American, Marxist intellectual, also has a foot in the postliberal camp.

Eugene Rogers, my favorite gay male theologian, is also something of a postliberal.

None of these theologians sound much like Barth. And neither does Placher.

Though Placher appreciates Auerbach’s claim about the Biblical world’s tyrannical claim, he quickly adds:

But these “tyrannical” narratives are narratives of a vulnerable God. If their form imposes a structure on all of reality, their content centers on a story about the rejection of force, the willingness to suffer in love. Those who find themselves caught up in *these* stories, therefore, cannot try to accumulate enough power to impose their

vision of the world on those around them without contradicting themselves, for the strategies of power are at odds with the vision these stories embody (162).

I'd like to press Placher a little further on this point. If the central content of the narratives is about the rejection of force, why keep using the language of force to describe the form of the narratives? Can the form really be at such odds with the content?

Why not say instead that their claim on us is insistent, radical, even all-pervasive, but still non-violent, and therefore neither tyrannical nor imposing?

I think that would allow Christians to remain faithful to the distinctiveness and radicality of their own vision while doing greater justice to the distinctiveness and radicality of other people's visions.

Placher is at least trying to do just that, which is evident in a pivotal passage that sums up the first 100 pages of the book:

Jesus was himself a marginalized outsider. The God he revealed is a God of love, not of violence. [Chapter 1] The Trinity reminds us that mutual love between equals, not a hierarchy of power, lies at the heart of who God is. [Chapter 3] The Bible is not a single master narrative that represses other voices, but a complex text in which many sometimes conflicting voices can be heard. [Chapter 4] (110)

I do want to point out that the last sentence seems to be saying that even the form of the Biblical narratives can't be as tyrannical or imposing as Auerbach and other postliberals have claimed. That leaves me wondering why Placher seems to have forgotten this point in the passage I quoted earlier.

Maybe it's because he sometimes remembers that point and sometimes forgets it that I find myself sometimes pleased and sometimes disappointed in the way he deals with the really tough questions in Chapter 5.

He asks: "Does a theology with a male savior inevitably contribute to the oppression of women? Does a theology with a suffering savior valorize suffering in a way that only makes it likely to continue? Is a theology that identifies one human figure as the self-revelation of God, the unique savior, somehow intrinsically unfair to and oppressive of adherents of other religious traditions?" (Back cover)

It's clear that Placher wants to answer all these questions in the negative. But I don't think he ever answers them with a simple "No." Instead he answers, "Not necessarily," or, "It all depends."

A theology with a male savior *can* contribute to the suffering of women, but it can also lead to their empowerment when we recognize that it is the marginalized and oppressed of any culture "who are in the most important ways like Jesus" (115).

It doesn't hurt his case that here he relies heavily on Elizabeth Johnson, a Catholic feminist (and not a postliberal), in making this most crucial point.

Likewise, a theology with a suffering savior *can* valorize suffering in an unhealthy way, but Placher responds that it is not suffering itself that these narratives celebrate but "God's vulnerability, God's willingness to *risk* pain and suffering in being open in love" (116).

Suffering too can be good, but only as an act of resistance aimed at short-circuiting the cycle of violence and victimization.

I am more satisfied by the way Placher handles these first two questions than I am with the way he handles the issue of relating to other religious traditions. Placher readily confesses to a kind of tone deafness on this issue (120), and I'd have to agree that he does indeed come across as a bit tone-deaf.

Even so, I think he is right to question why some of us seem to feel such a horror about disagreeing on religious matters. Disagreement is not intrinsically oppressive, and sometimes covering over disagreement can be even more oppressive.

If some Hindu's still practice *suttee* (burning a deceased husband's widow), should we be content to say that it's entirely their business, that we are in no position to object under *any* circumstances? I don't think so.

But Placher's overall answer still leaves me dissatisfied:

Take Judaism as a special case, ... and recognize that adherents of other religions may well be saved, may well have hold of partial truths on matters where our own truths are partial as well, and may well be serving God's providential purposes in pursuing the depths of their own faiths. One could still believe that on fundamental matters they are wrong, and Christians who believe Christ to be in some sense uniquely God's self-revelation do presumably believe just that (125).

I am not convinced that "Christians who believe Christ to be in some sense uniquely God's self-revelation" have to believe "just that," i.e., that those who disagree are wrong on fundamental matters.

I'm not convinced, first, because to say that Christ is *in some sense* uniquely God's self-revelation is *not* to say that he is uniquely so *in every sense*.

And I'm also not convinced, because even if we think those who disagree with us about that matter are wrong, it does not follow that they may not be right about matters that are just as fundamental.

And I think my disagreement with Placher here is more consistent with his admission that "The Bible is not a single master narrative that represses other voices, but a complex text in which many sometimes conflicting voices can be heard" (110). I think this is one place where he let Auerbach's language of "tyranny" govern his thinking.

All that said, Placher remains one of my very favorite theologians. There's something about the way he writes that makes me want to agree with him even when I can't. He manages to make challenging claims without coming across as tyrannical, and that, I think, is a skill all of us could stand to cultivate for our entire lives.

But his final instruction to us is not just about writing-styles. It's about where we stand and with whom we identify, however we choose to write or speak:

The only way to communicate Christian faith with passion in a culture like ours without asserting cultural dominance in a way that is offensive to our neighbors and at odds with the central themes of the Christian stories is to keep rejecting the advantages that Christianity's residual cultural status could provide. We as Christians have to keep making ourselves into outsiders who can speak with a prophetic voice.

... It is from the margins, from the underside, that one can speak a prophetic Christian word that does not threaten one's non-Christian, fellow citizens (178).