

REVIEW

Peter Ochs

Another Reformation:

Postliberal Christianity and the Jews

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Peter Ochs, a Jewish theologian long involved in Jewish-Christian relations, uses a pragmatic philosophical framework, based on Charles Peirce, and his own critique of the dyadic structure of modernist thought, to examine postliberal Christian theologians, both in the US and Great Britain, with regard to “non-supersessionism.” Supersessionism is the doctrinal teaching arguing that Christianity is a new covenant between God and humanity, which replaces the covenant found in Torah between God and the Jewish people. Postliberal thought, Ochs argues, in its rejection of dyadic thinking, also rejects supersessionism as unnecessarily binary and undeserving of a full picture of the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus. He focuses on the theologians George Lindbeck, Robert Jenson, Stanley Hauerwas, John Howard Yoder, Daniel Hardy, and David Ford.

Ochs’ main point is that postliberal theologians hold that the Church need not turn from the Gospels or from the history of church doctrine in order to reject supersessionism. Ochs attributes this sea change in understanding Christian doctrine to a new, third epoch in the history of Judeo-Christian relations. This epoch, that of “postliberalism,” is one of “relationality that invites both critical reason and a reaffirmation of scriptural revelation” (p. 4). He approaches a fuller articulation of this epoch logically, albeit via a “theo-logic” that refuses exclusion and binary oppositions in favor of a pattern of thought that seeks to be reparative and thus guided by a “relational (and thus non-dyadic) logic of inquiry” (p. 11). This relational logic

cannot emerge from the merely human but must reveal itself in and as the Word of God.

Thus, the key term throughout the work is repair: Ochs reads all postliberal theology through the lens of repair, redemption, and/or correction within the life of the Church universal. In so doing, he builds a convincing case that repair is believed to be possible by these theologians, and that part of this reparative work is the healing of the theological, historical, and soteriological rift between Judaism and Christianity. As each theologian begins his analysis of how reparation may take place within the Body of Christ, each is led to suggest that this reparative work must extend to the people of Israel as well. Not merely denominational or historical schisms within the church, but the gulf between the claims of Christianity and the attitude toward Judaism conveyed by centuries of Church Fathers can and must be healed, and can only be healed by God's redemptive actions.

Ochs then proceeds to analyze a series of postliberal theologians, uncovering in their work a return to a deep inductive reading of Scripture, a keen sense of the brokenness of the church, and the need for repair. While the methodologies of each theologian, and even the foci of their studies, may differ, he argues that postliberal thought takes place along these lines. Furthermore, Ochs finds that a theologian's work leads to non-supersessionism as long as it follows the trajectory of postliberal thought. When one abandons non-dyadic logic and falls back into essentialist claims and strict boundaries, supersessionism rears its head, almost in spite of the intentions of the theologian in question (such as Yoder). Conversely, when a theologian transitions from making pragmatic truth claims for his/her particular faith community to making universal truth claims, we again find supersessionism present (as in the works of Milbank, he argues).

In Ochs' reading, American postliberal theologians tend to focus upon Christology. British postliberal theologians focus more upon the work of the Holy Spirit. Whereas American

theologians tend to reject supersessionism on Scriptural grounds (and out of a concern for a hermeneutics of *sola scriptura*), British theologians, in Ochs' reading, see the source of repair for the church in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit (pp. 168, 190). (Ochs makes an important aside here, noting that American tendencies to focus on Scripture mean that they are less comfortable in dialogue with Muslims. They are more comfortable engaging Jews, with whom they share a sacred text.)

As a non-theologian, I was struck by Och's claim for an implied assumption underlying all postliberal theology of the notion of wholeness and re-integration (thus implying a prior integration), reflected in a millennial hope that harmony and unity would occur in this world prior to the in-breaking of Messiah (for the first or the second time). There is little sense of the value of the broken, the non-integrated, as perhaps part of the world God made, rather than as a situation that needs to be fixed. While surely working for justice and the healing of rifts is as much a part of the call of Christ as any personal salvation, such an approach ignores the still-mutilated body of Christ-resurrected; it fails to acknowledge that the language of unity, wholeness, and integration has a distinctly modernist flavor. Ochs is incisive in pointing out moments in modern thought that seem to cling to a Cartesian hope for the 'lever' point, for certainty, and for unity of knowledge. However, this same longing for unity seems to underline this work. A clear distinction between the desire for union that is part of modernist thought (and therefore looked upon with suspicion by postliberal theologians) and this continued longing for unity articulated in Ochs' reading of these theologians is not immediately apparent.

Nevertheless, this is a masterful reading of postliberal theology. Ochs presents each theologian sympathetically, providing the general reader with an introduction to their work, while simultaneously providing much food for thought for the theologically educated reader. While the use of symbolic logic in the introduction may be difficult for the general reader, once

one enters into the inaugural chapter, one quickly feels welcome and at home. Ochs' careful, sparing use of rabbinic literature provides a helpful contrast, as he models alternative approaches to reading Scripture that find resonance with post-liberal techniques. One leaves this work feeling that one has truly learned something—be it a better understanding of post-liberal theology, a more nuanced interpretation of non-supersessionist thought, or a clearer sense of the history that undergirds all theological attempts. Ochs shows that post-modern thought is not relativism *per se*, but rather as always-already aware and a confession of one's relativity to God, time, and cosmos.