

A NORMATIVE VIEW OF PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY

By John B. Cobb, Jr.

Names and titles pose a difficult question. My title speaks of “progressive Christianity,” and that label is being widely used, such as by Progressive Christians Uniting. Yet I am going to limit myself to an account of progressive Protestantism. Indeed, I will focus even there on North America and especially the United States. The story of progressive Catholics is a quite different one, even in the United States, and most of what I have to say is quite strange to Latin Americans and Africans. A definition of progressive Christianity awaits shared discussion among progressives from many Christian communities. My comments will be more properly about the development of liberal Protestantism in the United States and the emergence from it of progressive Protestantism. I hope this can be one contribution toward the understanding of progressive Christianity. It intends to describe the situation of many of the board members of Progressive Christians Uniting – but not all.

Progressive Protestantism is a form of liberal Protestantism in the broadest sense of that term. Liberal Protestantism, like all forms of Christianity, looks both to the past and to the present. It differs from conservative Protestantism in the weight it places upon the present. It assumes that there is current knowledge and understanding that was not available to the biblical writers or to the early church. Often this should supersede the earlier views. Also the new knowledge provides new ways of studying and appropriating the authoritative events and texts of the past.

This formal definition can apply to highly diverse positions, so that liberal Protestantism can take many different forms. As an historical movement it has been closely related to the Enlightenment and has typically prided itself in formulating Christian beliefs in ways that fit coherently with the most enlightened thinking of the time. The Enlightenment emphasized the value and rights and responsibility of each individual, and Protestant liberalism followed suit. This individualism led to rejection of notions of divine control that seemed to undercut human freedom. Liberal Calvinists followed Arminius, and in England, Wesley identified himself as an Arminian.

The Enlightenment called for explaining worldly events in worldly terms, and this has usually meant that liberal Protestants have played down, if not totally denied, supernatural interventions in the course of nature and history. They have celebrated the freedom of scientists and adapted their thinking to the resulting worldview. They have seen God’s work in the human heart rather than in outwardly observable events. As this historical consciousness developed, liberals have incorporated it and employed its methods in understanding the Bible and the history of the church.

As the modern world view faltered and divided, Protestant liberalism did the same. Down through most of the nineteenth century, liberals assumed that whereas the nature studied by science was rightly understood as matter in motion, human

beings belonged to a different type of reality. Evolutionary theory made this sharp division impossible, and its acceptance led to two types of solution on the part of liberals. Some tried to revise the understanding of nature, so that human beings could accept the idea that they were part of this nature. Others followed the Kantian proposal of a new kind of dualism. In Kant's case the duality was between theoretical and practical reason, with morality and religion grounded in the latter.

The French Revolution introduced another strand into liberalism. For the first time it seemed that the basic structure of society was a human creation. This meant that structural injustices could be changed. The industrial revolution showed that human beings could fundamentally change the economic order. Previously liberals had shared with Christians in general the obligation to care for the needy. Now many of them began to think in terms of changing the structures that produced the need. In the United States the anti-slavery movement had the support of Protestant liberals. Later in the century the idea that Christians should work with God to bring God's Kingdom on earth became central to liberal Protestantism in the United States. From this point I will focus on the American liberal experience.

Liberal Protestantism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was part of the evangelical movement. It gave rise to the great day of Protestant missions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its leaders were devout believers, convinced that their beliefs expressed what faith in Christ called for in a changed world.

Liberal Protestants also gave important leadership in the ecumenical movement. Their passion for the unity of the church led them to come to terms in quite new ways with the multiple traditions, and to take these traditions with full seriousness. This led many liberals to a much deeper engagement with tradition than had been characteristic of most of them previously.

The deepest crisis for liberal Protestantism came with the decline of the Social Gospel. Its most important internal critic, Reinhold Niebuhr, pointed out that its enthusiasm was based in a false optimism based on a superficial understanding of human beings and their social relationships. He showed that liberals had been too much influenced by Enlightenment thinking and that deeper insights could be found in the Bible and the Christian tradition. He was convincing to many liberals who revised their thinking accordingly. Previously some liberals had seen past and present authority in opposition to one another, so that the more one appealed to one the less one appealed to the other. Niebuhr taught a generation of liberals that distinctive insights learned from the Bible and the Christian tradition could play a positive role in the understanding of the current situation and response to it. This had nothing to do with surrendering to external authority, resisting knowledge coming from science and historical scholarship, or returning to supernaturalist ways of thinking.

Unfortunately, the wiser and more biblical interpretation of current history that followed did not give rise to new programs of action. Niebuhr himself continued to

deal with the issues of justice fundamental to the Social Gospel, but most of those who followed him no longer found primary meaning in dedication to this struggle. Some turned to Brunner and Barth as their theological ground. For many of these people, this meant a rejection of liberalism rather than its correction and deepening.

Although Neo-orthodox theologians did not reject critical scholarship of the Bible or try to derive scientific ideas from it, they nevertheless eschewed any effort to render the message of the Bible continuous with the ideas that dominate the modern world. On the contrary they accented the difference. One could be basically shaped by one world or the other, the modern secular one or the biblical one. Barth developed his theology against the background of the German church which accepted the leadership of Hitler. In the Barmen Declaration he and his cohorts declared quite simply that Jesus is the one and only Lord for the Christian believer; therefore, Hitler could not be the *Fuehrer* of the church. It seemed that in Germany, this over-against-ness of the Bible to the culture was the only way in which resistance to Hitler could be grounded. The liberal openness to the culture and willingness to learn from it led to a Nazified church.

American liberals did not see their situation as analogous to the German church. They saw themselves as in the vanguard of opposition to totalitarianism, to war, and to anti-Judaism. They thought that Hitler should have been opposed in Germany by prophetic commitment to justice for all rather than by depicting the Bible as a radically external authority beyond critical questioning. Hence, at this point, those who most strongly identified themselves as liberals tended to oppose the influence of Neo-orthodoxy and even of Niebuhr. In doing so, they tended to emphasize the achievements of earlier forms of the movement in freeing individuals to think for themselves and supporting the work of secular historians and natural scientists. Despite the fact that Niebuhr and his followers belonged to the broad stream of liberalism, the term became associated more with the dualistic use for which the liberal tended to be less interested in the Bible and the tradition.

Accordingly, those who wore the label "liberal" most confidently interpreted the Neo-orthodox emphasis on biblical authority as a retrograde movement. The tone of this liberalism thus became defensive, and its evangelical rootage was weakened. It often seemed that "liberals" were clearer about what they did not believe than about what they did believe. Critics of Protestant liberalism tended wrongly to read this understanding of liberalism back into history, depicting liberalism as a kind of minimalism or as a predominantly deconstructive movement within Christianity.

The decline of Neo-orthodoxy came about, not through a revival of liberalism, but through "radical theology." The radicals assumed the accuracy of the Neo-orthodox critique of liberal Protestantism. The liberal "God," they thought, was too much watered down by its adjustment to the modern world view to replace the radically transcendent "God" of Neo-orthodoxy. But for the radicals, the Neo-orthodox "God" had "died." The Neo-orthodox God was at once incredible and oppressive. To try to sustain a stance of "faith" in this God that is wholly unsupported by experience, evidence, or argument is not credible. Further, human

beings can be mature and responsible only as they throw off the oppressive weight of this view of deity. The liberal response to the critique of radical theology was weak. The confident faith in God of the earlier liberals faded.

The same period saw the rise of Latin American liberation theology. This also castigated liberal Protestantism, this time for its participation in middle class North American enlightenment culture. Its Social Gospel at best sought to implement these individualistic middle class values, whereas what is really needed in the world are not a few further implementations of Enlightenment "rights," but a revolutionary restructuring of society. In the United States, black theologians and feminist theologians joined this critique of the social gospel and Protestant liberalism for having failed to see the depth of racism and patriarchalism in its own practices and beliefs. Ecological theology showed how deeply liberal Protestantism had celebrated its own anthropocentrism and how complicit it was in creating a context in which the rape of the earth had been approved.

Given this buffeting, it is remarkable that the liberal spirit survived as well as it did. The liberal churches lost ground in public standing, in members, and in resources, but they continued the best of the liberal tradition in continual hearing of criticism and taking it into account. They repented of their racist, patriarchal, and anthropocentric ways. They gave at least some moral support to Latin American and other liberation theologies.

Liberal Protestants repented of their religious exclusivism and especially of their long history of anti-Judaism and disparagement of Islam. They recognized how closely their missionary efforts had been bound up with North American middle class values and attitudes and with European and American colonialism, and they rethought the whole missionary enterprise. They promoted dialogue with other religious traditions.

They came to understand that they had benefited from a particularly close association with American culture as representing its dominant element. Instead of trying to cling to their privilege, they threw their support to experiments in cultural pluralism. They accepted the end of their hegemony in the public schools, for example. They attempted to become more pluralistic in their own internal life.

They listened to the protests of the sexual revolution and adapted themselves to what seemed sound. Whether this should extend to the full acceptance of non-heterosexual lifestyles has deeply divided them. Indeed, this issue has brought the differences between the more liberal segments of these denominations and the more conservative ones to the fore. Opposition to homosexuality has functioned as rallying point for conservatives who have been concerned about the liberal drift of their denominations. In several denominations the polarization around this issue threatens schism.

I believe that these changes in the teaching and ethos of liberal Protestantism show its continued vitality and authenticity. At the same time we must recognize that

they differ from the changes brought about by the Social Gospel in one respect. Those changes came from a creative impulse within liberal Protestantism. These come as responses to valid criticisms.

The liberal denominations do not have shared positive convictions that shape their responses and speak strongly to society as a whole. Their members, especially the more liberal ones, are generally vague about what they believe. Those members who are clear are usually holding on to traditional doctrines rather than forging new formulations. Liberal Protestants have generally given up on theology. They are clear that they want to be open to criticism and to a diversity of voices. They want to break the shackles of past teachings that oppress people. They want to work for peace and justice throughout the world. They want all those who inquire responsibly into history and nature to be free to do so, and they generally accept whatever consensus emerges among them. But they are not clear how to connect these deep convictions with their faith in God or with their faithfulness to Jesus Christ. These crucial topics are rarely discussed by liberal Protestants.

I have used the term “liberal” for this whole movement. I think it is correct to do so, for it is a fine continuation of the liberal spirit in a time of rapid change. However, fewer and fewer people in the old-line churches are now comfortable with that label. Some are unhappy because “liberal” has come to be used over against “evangelical,” and they rightly believe that commitment to the “evangel” or gospel is the heart of their faith. They think of “liberalism” in terms of the minimalism and deconstruction mentioned above. Others are unhappy because “liberal” has come to be used over against “liberation,” and they rightly believe that the critical insights of the various liberation movements are valid and crucially important. They want to break out of the middle class ethos and the commitment to Enlightenment values and ways of thinking. Others see that liberal Protestantism in the United States has been closely connected with American culture and long assumed that it represented what is normative in American society. They see that breaking with that self-image requires a deep change.

None of this necessarily requires a change of label. Over the years the content of liberalism has been transformed more than once; so we might consider our current dissatisfaction with previous forms as simply a new stage of liberalism. But many of us doubt that the term “liberal” can ever be fully separated from the Enlightenment views with which it developed. These include a kind of individualism that has become a negative factor in American society. They include a positive relationship to the cutting edge of the culture, much of which now seems to cut in the wrong direction. It seems that as long as Protestant Americans remain “liberal” they will not be able to mount an effective resistance to those many features of American society and politics that work against authentic faithfulness to Jesus Christ.

For example, even the most liberal churches have put up no effective resistance to the consumerism that has become the dominant “religion” of our nation. They have not protested the increasingly inhuman and anti-theistic thinking that dominates the university. They have difficulty in engaging in a serious critique of

the militarism and imperialism that characterize our foreign policy. And they largely ignore the take over of our political system and global economy by private and corporate wealth. Perhaps Protestant liberalism is too tied to culture, to middle class values, and to Americanism to become an effective prophetic voice.

At this point liberal Protestants discover that there is more kinship between the old-line liberal churches in the United States and the mainstream church in Germany than they had realized during the days of Barthian resistance. We find that a generalized appeal to justice does little to mobilize Christians to resist what is deeply wrong in our society. We talk more and more about the need for a new Barmen declaration. Our own reflections about the role of the Bible in Progressive Christians Uniting led us to set the Bible over against our culture in a way analogous to that of Barth. Even though our formulations in this paper connect us strongly and positively with the liberal tradition in a way Barthians did not, the call to resistance on the basis of the alien message of the Bible feels like a major break with our liberal heritage.

It is for many reasons, some of which I have identified, that heirs of the liberal tradition have sought a different term by which to identify themselves. Rather surprisingly, the term "progressive" has become by far the most widely adopted term. It has its own problems and limitations. But it serves in a general way to indicate a position that continues the liberal tradition but also breaks with its past forms. By using it one frees oneself of the burden of defending one's movement from the many valid criticisms that have been leveled against liberalism. One speaks with and for these criticisms instead.

One cannot say that "progressive" has a clear meaning in itself, such that some of those who use it should not do so. One may say that some who use it do not provide much reason to distinguish themselves from past forms of the liberal tradition. For some, for example, the main point is to free the language of the church from traditional rhetoric that cannot be taken straightforwardly by modern people. Their main concern is that Christians learn to say very directly what they mean and to avoid any hint of supernaturalism.

For some, the main point is to provide an alternative to the social teachings of the religious right. They are open to very diverse theological views as long as those who hold them advocate for the poor and oppressed and work for peace and justice in society. They do not support the effort to modernize the liturgy and the church's teaching seeing it as threatening to disconnect the contemporary church from its heritage. In any case, insistence on a thoroughly contemporary liturgy and statement of belief would exclude many who, they believe, should be included in the "progressive" movement.

My historical account explains that I prefer to see the mainstream of progressive Protestantism as different from either of these. It is the liberal tradition transformed first by its rejection of the dualism of commitment to the tradition and commitment to new insights in the present. It wants to be deeply continuous with

the Bible and tradition and believes that this continuity requires openness to new insights. It has been transformed by its internalization of liberation theologies and multiple criticisms of the past forms of liberalism. It is a movement that is trying to detach itself from American culture so as to engage in prophetic criticism and to find ways of authentic resistance.

In addition to the element of discontinuity with traditional liberalism, there is another reason for a new name. Liberals who have gone through the changes noted find that they have much in common with some Christians who have come through quite different histories and have never thought of themselves as “liberal.” For example, participants in the global ecumenical movement, coming from many traditions, have struggled with many of the same issues as liberal Protestants and have come to a similar position. The international association of reformed churches has issued a call for resistance that has inspired those who come from a liberal background. But the leaders of that association do not think of themselves as “liberals.” Some Anglo-Catholics have arrived quite independently at similar views. They do not consider themselves “liberal” and certainly not “liberal Protestants.” The term “progressive” is more acceptable and more welcoming to these kindred spirits.

The progressive movement has many weaknesses. It is more united by its ethos and passion for social righteousness than by doctrinal formulations. On the latter point, it shares the weakness of twentieth-century liberalism generally. That is, it agrees on an affirmation of theological pluralism, but it does not know how to affirm the Christian ground of the acceptance of that diversity.

This movement is, of course, in process. Today it is united by the enormity of shared distress about what is happening in the church and in society. It suffers with liberalism the danger that it is much clearer about what it opposes than about what it affirms. Nevertheless, it may become a context within which positive shared convictions emerge about the nature of Christian faithfulness in our time. If its trumpet can sound clear and convincing notes, different from those sounded elsewhere in either church or society, it *could* become a center for new unity, new energy, and growing effectiveness of the gospel. It *could* contribute to the salvation of the world from the self-destruction toward which it now seems to rush.

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