THE FUTURE OF LIBERAL THEOLOGY

Keith Ward

The motto of liberal theology might be: ‘Use your mind to interpret Scripture and tradition’. This means paying attention to the purpose and genre of Scriptural texts and conciliar definitions, to their historical contexts and to the main theological commentaries on them. It means paying attention to the changing modes of philosophical and scientific thought throughout history, and the way they set new contexts for theological thinking. And it means paying attention to the global context of faith, and how Christian beliefs respond to the diverse cultures and histories of the world.

A non-liberal theology assumes that there is just one obvious meaning to Scripture. Somebody knows it, and you must just accept what they say. Christian beliefs never change. Historical changes, new scientific discoveries and cultural influences are either irrelevant to Christian beliefs or must be resisted.

One difficulty with a non-liberal approach is that there are many different Christian churches, each with a different interpretation of Scripture and different traditions. There is nothing wrong with that, but it becomes implausible to think that the Scriptural interpretation of one church among many is the ‘one obvious meaning’. The meaning cannot be quite so obvious! Church members may believe that the interpretation of their church is nearest the truth. But, if it is accepted that members of other churches are intelligent, informed and sincere, no-one can reasonably believe that their interpretation is or even should be obvious to everyone.

Thus arises the liberal principle that there is a legitimate diversity of opinion about interpreting Scripture and tradition. This is to be carefully distinguished from the claim that every interpretation is equally valid. On many matters there may be only one truth, and on many matters some views are more adequate than others. But people can reasonably disagree
about what the truth is, and the right to dissent and disagreement is both a foundation of the Protestant Reformation and explicitly asserted by the Second Vatican Council.

Another difficulty with non-liberal theology is that historical changes in belief are undeniable. Even within the New Testament, a very radical change is recorded (Acts 15), from believing that the Torah (the Jewish Law) should be kept by Christians, to believing that it was not obligatory for Christians. The formation of the New Testament canon changed forever what Christians mean by ‘Scripture’, adding many new books to the Scripture that Jesus and the Apostles would have known. Interpretations of the Lord’s Supper have changed considerably over the years, and the changes are recorded in the works of theologians like Aquinas, Calvin, Zwingli and many others who all argue against previously held interpretations.

So the liberal principle that Christians must continually re-think the way they present and understand their beliefs, in the light of new problems or in different historical situations, has in fact always been accepted in practice. Sometimes Christians call such change or re-thinking ‘development’, and there is little harm in that. The fact is that many Christian beliefs are extremely unlikely to have been explicitly held or taught by either Jesus or the Apostles. Each Christian generation must work out anew what the Spirit has to teach the churches. Change may be Spirit-led but it is still change, and it requires human thought and reflection.

Put like this, the key liberal principles of legitimate diversity of belief, and the necessity of historical reformulations of belief, may just seem to be part of orthodox belief. And so they are. Orthodoxy should be, at least to this extent, liberal. So why does ‘liberal theology’ alarm some people? Maybe it is because some people want a closed system of beliefs which never changes and is absolutely certain, one reliable truth in an ocean of uncertain opinions.

Christianity seems a poor candidate for such a wish. Jesus never wrote a book. The Bible contains no short and unambiguous statement of agreed doctrines, which would stop people arguing about what it means once and for all. Of course there are some central Christian beliefs, but there is even some disagreement about what those are.
Those who called themselves Christian fundamentalists listed such things as the verbal inerrancy of Scripture (not explicitly stated in the Bible), the virgin birth, the divinity of Jesus, the physical return of Jesus and the substitutionary theory of the atonement (not formulated as such until John Calvin did so in the sixteenth century!).

I would not think these are the most central Christian beliefs. My list would be: the existence of a God of unlimited love (revealed in the life of Jesus), the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus (as signs of God’s self-giving love and renewal of life), the continuing presence of the Spirit and the promise of eternal life.

There is some overlap between these lists. But the former focuses on Scripture as a set of propositional truths, which are given a literal and restrictive interpretation (insisting on just one literal reading of what many see as metaphorical and allusive texts). The latter focuses more on personal experiences, both public and private, of the love of God revealed in the person of Jesus. And it insists that God’s love is concerned above all with human flourishing and the proper fulfilment, so far as is possible, of all creatures. The former offers a text-based faith, with literal interpretations influenced largely by Calvin, and tends to prioritise intellectual assent to propositional truths. The latter offers an experience-based faith, with the possibility of a number of interpretations, some of them metaphorical or symbolic. It tends to prioritise practical commitment to fullness of life and human welfare over theoretical correctness. Schleiermacher is an influential theologian in this tradition, but his views are by no means definitive.

This contrast exposes two more characteristic features of liberal theology, in its main historical forms. It tends to be experience-based. And it is typically non-authoritarian, feeling affinity with theologians like Schleiermacher and Tillich, but not feeling bound to accept their specific interpretations of Christian belief. All human beings make some mistakes.

This is what worries some Christians (and many non-Christians, who think that Christians should be bound by a clear set of doctrines with an authoritative interpretation). The worry is that both personal experience and personal opinion can lead to some very odd beliefs. People are very odd, so what is to prevent an experience-based Christian faith from
evaporating into a chaos of conflicting and largely irrational views, where anything goes?

This is an important challenge. But an observer might fairly say that this has already happened in the Protestant world, where many conflicting views, some of them very odd, exist but are consigned to different denominations. In the Catholic world it exists too, but is covered over by the official teaching of the church, which people often just ignore. In a way, liberals simply bring such differences out into the open, and try to contain them in one church where conflicts are accepted, but demoted in importance.

How can there be one church of such a variegated sort? Ironically, it is Calvin who suggests the answer (Schleiermacher was, after all, a Calvinist). Calvin thought that the church is not primarily or exclusively a visible institution, but the invisible body of all those who genuinely seek to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. That church exists in many visible forms, but it truly exists wherever the good news of salvation from sin—through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—is preached, and the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist are celebrated, in whatever particular form.

There is a central core of belief and practice to such a church. A God of self-giving love has acted in and through Jesus to liberate humans from sin and unite them to God, and continues to act through the Spirit to do so. In the Eucharist God makes this liberation present to humans everywhere.

This is a simple set of beliefs. But its implications and foundations challenge the best human thought, and it is hardly surprising that this gives rise to many different interpretations. People can know and believe that salvation from sin and union with God is offered to all through Jesus Christ. This implies that the Gospels provide a reliable record of the life and teachings of Jesus, and that the church provides a reliable means of forgiveness and unity with God. Christians have to have, or hope to have, some experience of that in their own lives. But they do not have to have any particular interpretation of difficult Biblical texts. They do not have to believe everything written in the Bible or said by some church leader or theologian.
Christians must learn to say ‘This is how I see it’, rather than ‘This is the truth’. Of course, they should hope it is the truth. But they have no right to say that they know that it is. This does not mean that anything goes, that all views are equally acceptable. It does mean that no-one is beyond criticism, and that one should be guarded in expounding what one believes to be true.

There are four main principles of theological liberalism; given a central core of beliefs, there should be an acceptance of diversity of interpretation, acceptance of the necessity of historical reformulation in new contexts of expanding knowledge, acceptance of the fallibility of human knowledge and a stress on the primary importance of personal experience and human flourishing, rather than assent to precisely formulated propositions in religious faith.

These principles can be implemented in many forms of Christian faith, and need not lead to the foundation of a new ‘liberal sect’. Indeed, the principles can be implemented in many non-Christian systems of belief. There may be a fully global liberal alliance which would lead to a much more tolerant and empathetic relationship between world faiths, and that may be one of the moral imperatives of our historical epoch.

For Christians in the immediate future, however, the task is to secure for these liberal principles an overt, non-combative but assertive place within existing churches. There is a good case for saying that they have always been present as central elements of the Christian faith, and have only been opposed by those who desire a set of exclusive, unchanging, infallible beliefs. Since Jesus himself did not write or dictate any such set of beliefs, it seems that unless things go badly wrong, the future belongs to liberal theology.

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