
The trilogy of which this is the second volume will constitute the finest study of American liberal theology from 1805 on. All future studies of liberal theology, American theology or the individual thinkers will have to address this book.

American liberal theology is a philosophically rich tradition and also a major strand of American intellectual life. Yet it is frequently overlooked by philosophers for whom theology denotes orthodoxy, repetition of old ideas, and dogmatism. Some figures treated here, like Paul Tillich, Douglas Clyde Macintosh, Henry Nelson Wieman, Albert C. Knudson, and Edgar S. Brightman are well known in philosophical circles, others, like George Burman Foster, Edward Scribner Ames, Rufus Jones and H. Richard Niebuhr are less well known but are rich in philosophical ideas.

This volume is the best study of American liberal theology, warts and all, from 1900 to mid-century. Detailed and well documented scholarship includes biographical and sociological context, analysis of ideas, and evaluation. There is a detailed, sometimes gut wrenching, exploration of their ideas and actions regarding war and race relations Dorrien achieves a nice balance of appreciative and critical judgments.

This volume includes major figures such as Walter Rauschenbusch, Henry Nelson Wieman, Edgar S. Brightman, Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich and lesser known figures such as Vida Scudder, Henry P. Van Dusen, Rufus Jones, Georgia Harkness and Howard Thurman.

In large part this volume is a tale of three cities: New York ("evangelical modernism" and, later, American neo-orthodoxy at Union Theological Seminary), Chicago (socio-historical functionalism and later the varieties of process empiricism at The Divinity School of the University of Chicago), and Boston (personalism at Boston University School of Theology).

For Dorrien the essence of liberal theology is that "all claims to truth," theological or otherwise, "must be made on the basis of reason and experience, not by appeal
to external authority. Christian scripture may be recognized as spiritually authoritative within Christian experience, but its word does not settle or establish truth claims about matters of fact... The liberal theology movement was led by pastors, but, linked with a rising Progressivism in American politics and religion, it gained a foothold in prominent American divinity schools and seminaries. In the early twentieth century it became a field-dominating movement... but their sweeping optimism and success set them up for a hard fall, and they were slow to recognize that their appeal to the 'best of modern knowledge' often turned academic and cultural fashions into new external authorities" (1-2). "Most liberal theologians were Victorian romanticists who conceived good religion as the triumph of cultivated spirit over nature," though the naturalistic-empirical tradition spurned all forms of nature/spirit dualism. "Specifically, liberal theology is defined by its openness to the verdicts of modern intellectual inquiry, especially historical criticism and the natural sciences; its commitment to the authority of individual reason and experience; its conception of Christianity as an ethical way of life;... and its commitment to make Christianity credible and socially relevant to contemporary people" (3).

Dorrien makes the important (and controversial) point of treating Reinhold Niebuhr, John Bennett and Paul Tillich as liberals. "Much of the scholarly literature overidentifies American theological liberalism with factors that were peculiar to its period of optimistic ascendency between 1885 and 1917. Liberal theology existed long before 1885, and it remains an important ongoing tradition in forms that bear little relation to the social gospel belief that Christian idealism is building the kingdom of God. Moreover, the liberal character of the Niebuhrian-Tillichian alternative becomes clearer when the optimistic evolutionism and immanentism of the early social gospel are not defined as liberal theology... Niebuhr, Bennett, and Tillich belonged to the liberal tradition, even as they insisted that liberal theology was wrong to sacralize idealism, wrong to regard reason as inherently redemptive, and wrong to suppose that good religion must extinguish its mythical impulses." (3-4, 10). Thus this book is part of a rethinking of the simplified picture of liberal theology popularized by Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr and now part of the received wisdom of American intellectual history. (For such revisions, see William D. Lindsey, Shailer

Dorrien also makes the important move of treating D. C. Macintosh of Yale as a part of the Chicago tradition, often overlooked by those who construct the history of that school. (For a critique of this treatment of Macintosh, see Edgar A. Towne, "Response to Gary Dorrien," American Journal of Theology and Philosophy 24 (May 2003), 151-156.)

Dorrien starts with the Ritschlians who wrote field-defining textbooks, William Adams Brown, William Newton Clarke plus Henry Church King. He moves to the social gospel writers, Walter Rauschenbusch and Vida Scudder. For the Chicago School the studies are on George B. Foster (the subject of two heresy trials, reviews of whose writings and speeches were front-page news in Chicago, and who helped inspire both the writing of The Fundamentals, the earliest Fundamentalist manifestos, and the Humanist movement), Shailer Mathews, Shirley Jackson Case, Edward S. Ames, Douglas C. Macintosh, G. B. Smith, and Henry N. Wieman. The Boston School is represented by Albert C. Knudsen, Francis J. McConnell, Edgar S. Brightman, with glances at Peter Bertocci, Borden Parker Bowne, Harold DeWolf, Ralph T. Flewelling, John Lavely, Walter Muelder, and Paul Schilling. Other studies are a fine treatment of the changes in Henry Emerson Fosdick and also of Rufus Jones, Georgia Harkness, Benjamin E. Mays, Henry P. Van Dusen, and Howard Thurman. Scudder, Harkness, Mays and Thurman are important for what we can learn of the history of discrimination in America and Thurman especially as a mediator between Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

Where I am most familiar with the writings Dorrien studies (the Ritschlians, the Chicago school and, to a lesser extent, the Union evangelicals) I can attest to the accuracy of his scholarship and the soundness of his judgments (See W. Creighton Peden and Jerome A. Stone, The Chicago School of Theology—Pioneers in Religions Inquiry, 2 vols., Lewisburg, PA: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1996).

One may find fault with this volume. I would have given greater emphasis to Edward Scribner Ames, Eustace Haydon, and Gerald Birney Smith and would have included
John Dietrich, Curtis Reese, Charles F. Potter among the humanists and the Humanist Manifesto. I would have spent more time on Foster's Nietzsche scholarship and his debates with Clarence Darrow. It may be nit picking to ask where Frank C. Doan, Francis Greenwood Peabody, Clarence Skinner, Frederick M. Eliot, and Kenneth Patton are. But these are like faulting Reinhold Seeberg's Dogmengeschichte for not including or giving prominence to one's favorite writers from a dissertation footnote. This volume is long enough already!

The two completed volumes constitute the richest and most thorough history of American liberal theology to date and when the trilogy is completed it will be the benchmark of studies of American liberal Theology.

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For the reader in search of a way into the contemporary philosophical debate about the nature and function of truth, Gerald Vision's Veritas: The Correspondence Theory and Its Critics is probably not the best place to start. Vision's work is directed at scholars who already know their way around in the field and the issues are engaged at a level of abstraction and sophistication that make it difficult for anyone but the specialist to follow. Vision provides a useful overview of the issues in his opening chapter, but in the main sections of the book if one is not familiar with contemporary writers like Crispin Wright and Paul Horwich it will be very difficult to follow the course of argument. Better introductions to the field are available, perhaps none better than Richard Kirkham's Theories of Truth (1992).

Philosophers have been thinking very hard for a very long time about the precise nature of truth and it is only to be expected that their discussions will have become complicated and subtle. But at the same time, there is no issue of potentially greater philosophical concern to all people than truth itself, no issue which might have so direct and important a bearing on the project of living a human life. If philosophers allow their debates to become