
Postliberal theology – associated with writers such as George Lindbeck, Hans Frei and Stanley Hauerwas in the United States and extending to the Radical Orthodoxy school in the United Kingdom – is normally assumed to be dismissive of attempts to engage in constructive apologetics in a pluralist public realm. As Lindbeck himself once remarked, ‘Postliberals are bound to be sceptical ... about apologetics.’ For such theologians, biblical tradition narrates and guides Christian communities’ accounts of building and inhabiting a scriptural world and represents a ‘thick description’ of the truth-claims embodied in a community’s practices. Any attempt to frame discourse in common or neutral language is futile. Postliberals also argue that revisionists’ appeal to universal religious experience is a denial of the special revelation of God in Christ. Modern theology, as represented by liberals such as David Tracy and Schubert Ogden, ‘has so accommodated to modern culture for apologetic purposes that it no longer brings its particular word to the world but simply reinforces secular culture by providing it with a balm of transcendent security’ (p. 18).

In turn, liberal or revisionist theologians have accused postliberals of not even attempting to engage constructively with the public realm. Ogden criticises Hans Frei for simply describing Christian truth-claims rather than defending its truth – a failure to ‘clearly and consistently distinguish the secondary praxis of doing theology from the primary praxis of bearing witness’. And liberation theologians, the third of the contemporary movements to be incorporated into Kamitsuka’s survey, often cast a plague on both other houses by insisting that the criterion of transformative orthopraxis, rather than conformity to ideologically inert intellectualising, must shape any kind of theological intervention in the body politic. So, for example, Gustavo Gutierrez has argued that the apologetic task is not aimed at convincing non-believers but humanizing the non-persons. Whilst theology must engage with secular world, it must not forget questions of justice as well as truth.

David Kamitsuka’s book is an attempt to mediate between these three significant theological movements of the late twentieth century. He offers an even-handed and informative evaluation of liberation theology, inspired by John XXIII’s legacy of *aggiornamento*, which affirmed the vocation of the Church in the world and advocated a committed theological stance toward
the preferential option for the poor; the liberal tradition, set in train by Schleiermacher’s ‘bold and subtle defense of religious piety in the face of religion’s cultured despisers’; and Barth’s rendition of the ‘strange new world of the Bible’, issuing an uncompromising challenge to secular ideologies. Rather than focusing on their essential differences, or taking up a partisan position, however, Kamitsuka attempts a more eirenic and dialogical approach. He aims not only to interrogate the fault-lines and tensions between these three positions, but to suggest ways in which all perspectives bear traces of the others, leading to possibilities of greater convergence and constructive dialogue. His core question, then, is whether contemporary theology can balance ‘demands for intelligibility in the public realm, remembering the suffering of the victims of oppression, remaining open to plurality within the church, and the biblical imagination necessary to form Christian communities responsive to these challenges’ (p. 4).

Kamitsuka’s analysis proceeds from a conviction that the differences are matters of emphasis rather than fundamental incompatibility. Postliberals are concerned with a ‘normative redescription of Christian communal beliefs’; revisionists set out their stall according to a fully critical theological reflection and the apologetic exercise of defending Christianity’s intellectual and rational credibility; liberationists judge theology by the standards of ‘solidarity with the oppressed.’ Following on from these core criteria, Kamitsuka then explores three core issues which exemplify the debates between the three perspectives, which are essentially questions of theological method and hermeneutics. First comes the question of how to relate the scriptural world to contemporary culture. Postliberals fear that liberal theology tries to make Christian faith so accessible to secular people that they import unquestioned concepts at the expense of the integrity of the scriptural world and Christian practice (pp. 177-178). Yet Kamitsuka perceptively wonders whether, in repudiating extra-theological authorities, post-liberals are condemning a tendency to appropriate an entire secular metanarrative devoid of theological critique, rather than questioning the heuristic use of social science (p. 181). Kamitsuka’s nuanced interrogation of the substance of each perspective’s claims and counter-claims reflects his ultimate concern to open up the possibilities of shared territory and some degree of convergence between the various perspectives.

Secondly, Kamitsuka focuses on the question of how each perspective responds to diversity within the Christian community, especially in terms of incorporating the voices of the excluded or marginalized. Clearly, in its commitment to God’s preferential option for the poor, and Gutierrez’s