

Liberal Reform in Recent Christianity

The basic idea

Some Christians respond to modernity in the broader culture by accepting its intellectual force, and deciding that traditional forms of Christian expression no longer connect well or speak effectively to the culture because of the degree to which the culture has become modern. So, in order to maintain an effective and relevant Christian message within a more or less modern culture, they want to reshape and reform the meaning of Christianity.

This is something like what the Protestant fundamentalists are also aiming at. They, too, seek to create a new emphasis in Christianity that will respond to modernity. But the fundamentalist aims to create emphases in Christianity that will help it to regain lost cultural territory (to use Marty's phrase). A liberal, by contrast, is not so much trying to regain some lost fundamentals by recreating an idealized past; rather, the liberal seeks to create a version of Christianity that has been fashioned to connect constructively with a modern future.

Liberals don't necessarily embrace everything about modernity – they will uniformly reject the idea that the secular realm is the only reality, for example. They may be politically active, or not. They may be deeply committed and not at all wishy-washy for themselves, but they are generally rather open to other's ideas, even when those differ from their own – except that they are highly critical of the fundamentalist approach.

Not necessarily about political liberalism

Sometimes the word "liberal" is used in public discourse to refer to someone who believes the government should establish a great many programs to assist citizens who are less well off financially. This idea of what counts as a liberal is not relevant in the context of this course as a defining characteristic of being a liberal Christian.

It is true that some Christian liberals favor government programs to aid the poor. For example, I would classify the liberation theologians as liberals, and they certainly favor political action to change the social structure in order to reduce poverty, provide medical care to everyone, and the like. But I call these folks liberals for a different reason than that. I call them liberals because they are wanting to dramatically change the emphasis in the Latin American church away from "Believe in Jesus so that you will some day go to Heaven" and toward "Love God, do justice here and now because you love God, and recognize your worth as a child of God". So, even though they may push for a politically liberal agenda, they count as liberals for this course because they are pushing for a dramatic change in the meaning of Christianity within their tradition. (They retain the idea of believing in Jesus as savior, but they want that to mean a lot more about life here and now, and not just focus on getting into Heaven.)

Some more examples of Christian liberalisms

Borg. Borg argued that the Genesis stories are not to be taken as literal history, but as metaphor. For many Christians, that will sound like a dramatic change to Christianity, but for some mainstream Christian traditions, it really isn't. As I pointed out in class, St. Augustine in the 4th Century was already arguing vigorously for the same thing. So, there has been quite a lot of variability within Christianity regarding this point, and that means that Borg will look like a liberal to some but not to others, if we are talking simply about his idea that Genesis is not literal history. A cleaner case for thinking of Borg as a liberal has to do with something else: his representation of the Genesis stories as Israel's stories, rather than the word of God. That is, Borg is proposing the idea that the Bible is not wholly the word of God. That proposal makes him seem quite liberal, to my way of thinking. He is influenced by a modern way of understanding how the Bible came to be written. (But notice that he thinks the points made by the Genesis stories are nevertheless true. He's not rejecting the Bible's truth in this case.) Borg is an influential young US Christian Protestant theologian.

Hick. One of the 20th Century's most well-known philosopher/theologians was a man from Britain, named John Hick. Recently, Hick wrote a book with the title, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*. The title pretty much says what the book argues for: Jesus was not truly divine; he was fully a human being, and nothing more. But he was especially in tune with God, and so he is truly worth paying attention to, and following. He shows what a human life in tune with God looks like. So, to say that Jesus is God incarnate is not literally true, but it is metaphorically true. (Sound familiar?) This move on Hick's part is inspired by modernity: he uses logic and reasoning to argue that the notion of a literal incarnation of God is nonsense. So, he rejects the traditional mythology. But he proposes something new in its place—an improved Christian message. This represents a major innovation these days (although the idea was very popular in the early days of Christianity, as we have discussed earlier). We have not read anything by Hick for this course.

Spong. Remember the reading by Spong about how traditional Christianity is severely challenged by modernity? We didn't read anything other than Spong's arguments to the effect that Christianity is in trouble because of modern thinking. Spong has written several books about this. Here's the title of one of them: *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*. A fundamentalist might write a book with a title like that, but Spong is no fundamentalist. The changes to Christianity he proposes are of the same magnitude as the changes proposed by Bultmann, and are intended not to bring back some older "fundamentals", but to reshape Christianity into a mold that connects better with a modern outlook.

Social gospel. This refers to a Christian movement in the US in the first part of the 20th Century that put almost exclusive emphasis on improving the everyday lives of the lower socio-economic classes through such things as the creation of labor unions. By itself, this is not particularly liberal in our sense, but when you consider that this emphasis took the place of traditional Christian themes about believing in Jesus in order to be saved and go to Heaven, and allowed the Christians to avoid having to talk about the mythology of the New Testament, then it begins to look a lot more like a liberal

movement. This movement is something like an early version of the liberation theology movement in Latin America.

Church without theology. Some large Christian churches talk very little about the traditional Christian mythology regarding Jesus, sin, salvation, and so forth. Instead, the emphasis is on self-esteem, good personal relationships, family ties, caring for those in need, promoting peace in the world, avoiding materialism, and the power of love. Or other similar themes. By talking almost entirely about such topics, and mentioning Jesus as a model, essentially a new, more modern form of Christianity emerges – one that has exchanged God-talk with talk about positive thinking and social relations. I suppose this is one way to popularize Bultmann's ideas, but I think he would be really disappointed in this approach. He wanted something theologically deeper.