

“A House on the Sand”:
American Theological Liberalism
From the 18th – 21st Century

Part IV – 1960’s to the Present

Introduction:

The task set before us in this final installment of the story of American Liberal Theology is to consider the torrent of ideas, people, and schools of thought that has flowed over the last 50 years. To change the metaphor back to organic growth: the seeds of American theological liberalism were sown by 18th century church leaders in New England (like Charles Chauncy). The roots were set down during the 19th century by figures like Horace Bushnell and Henry Ward Beecher. And the full flower began to bloom in the early 20th century with men like Walter Rauschenbusch, Shailer Mathews, and Harry Emerson Fosdick. What we see when we turn to the 1960’s and beyond isn’t just a single flower, but a vast assortment of growth more on the order of a sizable garden or even immense forest. There is no way to paint a picture of American liberal theology from the 1960’s to the present (in 45 minutes) and not do an injustice to somebody somewhere. So many key figures are going to be necessarily left out. This hour, among the names we will *not* investigate (but easily could) include Harold DeWolf, Nels Ferre, Bernard Meland, John Cobb, Schubert Ogden, Gordon Kaufman, Edward Farelly, Peter Gomes...the names are legion. What we will seek to do is better learn about the relationship of two major constituencies we haven’t spoken of yet. The first is the relationship between liberalism and the Roman Catholic Church, and the second is the role of women in the rise of theological liberalism. After that, we’ll consider four key figures in later 20th and early 21st century liberalism: Langdon Gilkey, John Shelby Spong, Marcus Borg and

finally Phillip Clayton. Let's begin this hour with a look at liberalism and Roman Catholicism.

1. American Theological Liberalism and the Roman Catholic Church (since 1943)

Why have we been able to survey nearly 200 years of American theological liberalism and not even heard so much as a whiff about the Roman Catholic Church? The simple answer to that important question is that until in the mid 1940's, the Catholic Church stood like an unmovable, unbending, unwavering citadel in the face of theological liberalism. For two hundred years in America, the Catholic Church was a stronghold and a fortress of conservatism that liberal theology was simply unable to penetrate. During the heyday of Protestant liberalism in America (in the early 20th century), the Vatican saw modernity creeping its way and they battened down the hatches. The papal encyclicals of 1899 and 1907 (that I won't even attempt to pronounce since I don't speak Latin¹) absolutely and unequivocally crushed the possibility of liberalism in the Catholic Church for the better part 50 years. Gary Dorrien observes:

“The Vatican's about face on modernity was chilling...Pope Leo XIII...Pius IX and Pius X...defined modernity exhaustively in the course of repudiating it; the particulars included biblical higher criticism, individual interpretation, evolutionary theory...and other beliefs cherished by American liberal Protestants...the Vatican...[argued] that modernist theology was the synthesis of all heresies...[finally] the Vatican instituted an oath against modernism, to be required of all Catholic clergy and theology professors.”²

It was a breath-taking display of magisterial authority and power. But it didn't last. Liberalism would wear down even the Vatican.

The first fissure that appeared in the ice was Pope Pius XII's 1943 encyclical which granted Catholic theologians the freedom to

¹ *Testem Benevolentiae* (1899), *Lamentabili Sane* (1907), and *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (1907).

² Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY. 2001. p.395

use the tools of interpretation of biblical higher criticism. From that time until the calling of the Second Vatican Council, liberal-leaning Catholic theologians worked tirelessly to press the bounds of Catholic orthodoxy as far as they could without coming under threat of church discipline. Issues on the table at Vatican II in the 1960's included: the education of Catholic laity in the contents of the Mass, the acknowledgment of elements of holiness and truth found outside the visible confines of the Catholic Church (i.e. relationship to Protestants, especially), and a vision of the inspiration and authority of the Bible that reflects the earlier 1943 encyclical regarding higher criticism. The reform was (in part) stated this way in Vatican II: "due attention must be paid both to the customary and characteristic patterns of perception, speech, and narrative which prevailed at the age of the sacred writer."³ Which, really is something that conservatives (of course) believe about biblical interpretation as well. The difference would be that such a statement in the hands of someone with a weaker view of Scripture's authority might use such a statement to introduce a position like the denial of the inerrancy or the inspiration of Scripture. Both of which the Catechism of the Catholic Church still officially teaches. And in my experience most Catholics believe.

Though individual liberal Catholic theologians certainly have existed, including (though not limited to): Gregory Baum, Richard McBrien, David Tracy, Anne Carr, and Elizabeth Johnson, they do stand as the exception rather than the rule. Nevertheless there is a breadth of theological thinking today, though, in the Catholic Church that simply wasn't there 60 years ago. The election of the last two Popes (Benedict and Francis) are something of a parable in this regard. It seems to me that though the overwhelming number of Catholics on the planet today are theological conservatives, they are something of a house divided given the reforms introduced at Vatican II and the breadth of public engagement and leadership of Popes Benedict and Francis.

³ Quoted in. Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony & Postmodernity – 1950-2005*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY. 2006. p.396

We'll close our little sketch here of liberalism and the Catholic Church with a powerful statement from J. Gresham Machen. Now Machen wrote this in 1923 and he died in 1937 so he did not live to see (or even imagine) the changes that a Second Vatican Council would introduce but this statement, I believe, to be in the main as accurate today as the day in which he wrote it. If evangelicals and Catholics wonder why they have so very much in common as it relates to world and life view, doctrinal convictions, political affinities, and the like, this statement from Machen goes a long way toward explaining why. In *Christianity and Liberalism*, Machen wrote:

“...serious...is the division between the Church of Rome and evangelical Protestantism in all its forms. Yet how great is the common heritage which unites the Roman Catholic Church, with its maintenance of the authority of Holy Scripture and with its acceptance of the great early creeds, to devout Protestants today! We would not indeed obscure the difference which divides us from Rome. The gulf is indeed profound. But profound as it is, it seems almost trifling compared to the abyss which stands between us and many ministers of our own Church. The Church of Rome may represent a perversion of the Christian religion; but naturalistic liberalism is not Christianity at all.”⁴

That's Machen. Clear. Controversial. Perceptive, isn't he? Let's turn to women in American Liberal Theology.

2. Women in American Liberal Theology (since 1830)

The role of women in the development of American theological liberalism began as early as 1830. We say 1830 because that was the year that Elizabeth Cady Stanton entered seminary. Stanton was born in the 1815 in Johnstown, New York. Her parents, Daniel and Margaret Cady, had 10 children. Five girls, five boys. Four of the boys died in childhood. The final son, named Eleazor, lived to graduate college and then himself died as a young man. Elizabeth's father was inconsolable. She was ten years old at the time and recalls:

⁴ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*. New Edition. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI. (1923) 2009. p.43.

“With my head resting against his beating heart, we both sat in silence, he thinking of the wreck of all his hopes in the loss of a dear son, and I wondering what could be said or done to fill the void in his breast. At length he heaved a deep sigh and said: ‘Oh, my daughter, I wish you were a boy!’ Throwing my arms around his neck, I replied: ‘I will try to be all that my brother was.’”⁵

If we had another entire seminar we might be able to begin to scratch the surface of the dysfunction in the paragraph I just read. But that moment explains much about Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s pursuits in life. She had a father who didn’t want her to be a woman. And even as a little girl, she tried not to be one.

In time, she became one of the earliest and most influential feminists in American history. Stanton was a passionate feminist, and she despised the traditional notions of womanhood. She once said: “When I think of all the wrongs that have been heaped upon womankind... Ah, how I do repent me of the male faces I have washed, the mittens I have knit, the trousers mended, the cut fingers and broken toes I have bound up!” She became a cobelligerent with Susan B. Anthony in the woman’s suffrage movement. Unlike Stanton, Anthony was not a professing Christian but they did have a common goal in the feminist movement. In order to aid the fledgling movement, Stanton composed what became known as *The Woman’s Bible* – published in 1895. Interestingly, Stanton was not a theological egalitarian. That is, she was quite certain that the Bible taught that men and women were different. Created for different roles in the home and in the church. She believed that the Bible was clear on the matter of male headship as leader, initiator, protector, and responsibility bearer. She also saw that Scripture taught that women ought to rejoice in and come underneath such worthy male leadership. She believed the Bible taught these things. And she hated it. Furthermore, she saw that Scripture communicated such truths as the virgin birth and the deity of Christ – she rejected these truths as well.

Another early significant female influence on the course of liberal theology was a woman named Vida Scudder. Born to

⁵ Stanton quoted in Dorrien, pp.214-215.

missionary parents in India in 1861. After the drowning death of her father, she and her mother moved back to the United States when she was ten years old. Eventually, she found her way to the Episcopal Church and then in due course enrolling at Oxford University in 1884 – she was the first woman ever to do so. Scudder’s embrace of liberalism was swift at the university. In the words Gary Dorrien: “Scudder gave no quarter to biblical literalism, hellfire, demons, substitutionary atonement, or other examples of unenlightened orthodoxy...”⁶ In 1887, she took a position at Wellesley College teaching English literature. Her greatest contribution to the development of liberal theology was through her work alongside Walter Rauschenbusch in the Social Gospel Movement. And though she had her reservations about him, she also appreciated the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr.

One more primary female influence on liberal theology before a veritable floodgate of women’s participation in the movement is Georgia Harkness. Harkness was born in 1891 into a conservative Methodist home. She entered Cornell University in 1908 and eventually studied at Boston University (a stronghold of liberalism in the Methodist tradition). By 1927, she was ordained by the Methodist Episcopal Church, and would become a champion for women’s ordination for an entire generation in what became the United Methodist Church. She was a liberal, but maybe a critical advocate of liberalism would best describe her. She was a tortured theologian in many ways. She struggled with the movement she had come to embrace. She once said:

“Liberalism needed to see in the Bible something more than a collection of moral adages and a compendium of great literature. It needed to see in Christ something more than a great figure living sacrificially and dying for his convictions. It needed to be recalled to the meaning of the cross and the power of the resurrection.”⁷

One of the defining moments in her life came when her father’s time to die drew near and she cared for him at his bedside until the end. Warren Harkness, as he lay dying, engaged Georgia in a

⁶ Dorrien, p.130.

⁷ Harkness quoted in Dorrien, p.405.

discussion about her literary output. After she told him she'd written seven books, he told her: "I think they must be good books. Wise men say they are. But I wish you would write more about Jesus Christ."⁸

After Stanton, Scudder, and Harkness blazed the trail for women in theological leadership within the movement, many more women followed their lead including luminaries like: Valarie Saiving, Garret Evangelical Theological Seminary's Rosemary Radford Ruether, Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, Vanderbilt Divinity School's Sallie McFague, University of Chicago's Nancy Frankenberry, Sheila Greeve Davaney of the Illif School of Theology, and Catherine Keller at Drew University. The place of women within the leadership of the American theological liberal movement is now cemented and central.

3. Langdon Gilkey (1919-2004)

Let's talk about Langdon Gilkey. Born in 1919 and raised in a theologically liberal home, Gilkey was perhaps better positioned than anyone before him for the dramatic departures from orthodoxy he would make. Educated at Columbia, Harvard, and Union Theological Seminary, Gilkey went on to teach at the University of Chicago. Gilkey is possibly best known for what he called: "God-is-dead-theology." And what is God-is-dead-theology? Well, in some ways it was the announcement not that the God who actually created and sustains the universe is dead, but rather the God of the Bible is dead. Gilkey did not see these "Gods" as one in the same. He didn't believe that the God who actually exists should be identified with the God of the Bible. Thus, God (that God) is dead. Gilkey once said it this way:

"For us, then, the Bible is a book of the acts Hebrews believed God might have done and the words he might have said had he done and said them – but of course we recognize he did not."⁹

⁸Quoted in Dorrien, p.406.

⁹ Gilkey quoted in Dorrien, p.277.

His cards are on the table here. His candor is refreshing and frightening at the same time. And speaking of candor, I want to close our sketch of Gilkey by listening to both Gary Dorrien and Langdon Gilkey himself talk about the difference between his generation of liberalism and the one that preceded them. Listen to this:

“Virtually all of the liberal leaders of the social gospel era were raised in homes that featured family devotions, Bible reading, personal prayer, and Sunday observance. They continued these spiritual practices in their own lives, but in raising their children, many of them considerably cut back on family devotions and Bible study. Langdon Gilkey, whose father was a classic example of this trend, observes that liberal leaders like Fosdick, Mathews and Charles Gilkey were products of a spiritual culture that began to wither in the next generation. Gilkey recalls that at the funeral of his mother, Geraldine Gilkey, Fosdick recited Scripture passages for half an hour from memory; Gilkey remarks: ‘My generation of neo-liberals studied the Bible, but Fosdick’s generation read it everyday and knew it line by line. No wonder they would talk so easily of ‘Christian experience’. My generation hardly had a clue as to what it meant!’”¹⁰

So much of what went wrong with American liberal theology is there in that memory. Notice that the social gospel leaders *themselves* grew up in homes where the Bible was read and Christ was worshiped as a family. That should serve all of us parents notice, should it not? Family worship is not a crank that we turn and out comes a faithful child on the other side. It doesn’t work that way. Fosdick *himself* cited Scripture for half an hour at Geraldine Gilkey’s funeral. However, for the generation who “cut back” on family worship, the consequences were even more dire. It was a like surrendering their children to Satan from the start. Langdon Gilkey (who died just nine years ago at the age of 85) developed God-is-dead-theology. Let’s move on to John Shelby Spong and Marcus Borg.

¹⁰ Gilkey quoted in Dorrien, p.553.

4. John Shelby Spong (1931-) and Marcus Borg (1942-)

We take Spong and Borg together because they come from the same generation and have followed similar paths. Like Beecher and Fosdick before them, John Shelby Spong and Marcus Borg are popularizers of American theological liberalism. This is important because throughout much of the latter half of the 20th century, American liberal theology was increasingly marked by two features: brilliance and incoherence. Are you familiar with the statement Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. made about simplicity and complexity? If you haven't heard it, or like me have heard it but not understood it – listen carefully to this...it's worth getting in your bloodstream. Holmes said: "I would not give a fig for the simplicity on this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity."¹¹ The liberal scholars who succeeded in disseminating their work were the ones who could speak plainly and simply to the greatest number of people. Part of the Achilles heel of scholarship (and it's by no means unique to liberalism) is the frequent inability to state complex realities simply. Now opposite error (reductionism) is just as problematic. This is one that conservatives are often guilty of, that is, simplicity on this side of complexity. Painting people with a broad brush when a smaller, more detailed brush would be more fitting. Generalizations when specificities are called for. Sweeping statements when nuance would much more fitting. But like we said, for liberal theologians their frequent difficulty wasn't simplicity on this side of complexity, it was simplicity on the other side of complexity. That is, stating the complex in simple, straightforward language. Liberal theologians in many cases have not been good at it. The way that Gary Dorrien put it is brilliant he said: "...liberal theology was short on intelligibility, not

¹¹ http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Talk:Oliver_Wendell_Holmes,_Jr . Accessed 11-12-13 @ 8:23pm.

intelligence.”¹² Similarly, John Piper has an article called “How to Be Interesting and Unhelpful.”¹³ Exactly.

So in the 1980’s and 1990’s the two men who stepped onto the brilliant but confusing field of liberal academic scholarship and began to translate it for the average person were John Shelby Spong and Marcus Borg. The difference between Spong and Borg and the rest the liberal academy is that they have a gift for short, punchy direct statements written in language that adult Sunday school classes can process.¹⁴ Theologically, Spong is as progressive and liberal as anyone before him. He called the Apostles and Nicene Creeds “empty and meaningless”.¹⁵ Practically, his books have sold in the tens of thousands because his titles like: *This Hebrew Lord* (1974), *Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism* (1991), *Born of a Woman* (1992), *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* (1994), *Liberating the Gospels* (1996), and *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* (1998), titles like these are not written for professional scholars, they’ve been written specifically the church in mind.

On the same score, we have Marcus Borg. Equally as capable of writing for other scholars, Borg has mainly chosen to serve the church with his theology. I say “mainly” because Borg has been a

¹² Dorrien, p.522.

¹³ <http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/how-to-be-interesting-and-unhelpful> . Accessed 11-12-13 @ 12:28pm.

¹⁴ For example, Spong says: “I think one of the things we’ve got to look out for is human beings claiming that they know how God operates.” Though it sounds plausible, if taken seriously, this statement is an utter repudiation of Holy Scripture and even Christ himself as accurate and knowable revelations of God. http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/j/john_shelby_spong.html Accessed 11-12-13 @ 8:28pm. And Borg says: “How can women be in the image of God if God cannot be imaged in female form?” http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/22721.Marcus_J_Borg Accessed 11-12-13 @ 8:30pm. Borg, of course, is half right. There are feminine images of God in the Scripture: Deuteronomy 32:11 and Matthew 23:37. And women are without question made in his image as are men (Genesis 1:27). But Borg would use such Scriptures to justify calling God ‘Our Mother in Heaven’.

¹⁵ Spong in Dorrien, p.525.

significant contributor to The Jesus Seminar – an academic think tank of liberal scholars whose revisionist portrait of the historical Jesus bears little resemblance to the one we meet in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.¹⁶ Borg’s most well-known books include: *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (1994), *The God We Never Knew* (1997), *The Heart of Christianity* (2003), and *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* (2001). Gary Dorrien’s summary observation of the heart of Borg’s theology is apt, Dorrien writes:

“[Borg] describe[s] faith...[in] a panentheistic God...Christianity is not the only true religion, Borg assure[s], but all people need a satisfying spiritual practice, and progressive Christianity makes an enriching and challenging spiritual home.”¹⁷

Both Spong and Borg continue to write and lecture today and make the complexities of liberal theology simple and intelligible for non-specialist adult readers today. One last sketch, Phillip Clayton.

5. Phillip Clayton (1955-)

Phillip Clayton, in my personal estimation, is the now key figure to watch in what is today a three hundred year old movement. If American theological liberalism lives and indeed thrives to the point of making a comeback in terms of number religious adherents, I believe that will be due in no small way to the influence of Phillip Clayton. Who is this man? Clayton was raised in a conservative Protestant home (I think he would say fundamentalist, at least evangelical). He graduated Yale University and then went on to postgraduate studies at the University of Munich, Germany. In March 2005, he became the Ingraham Professor at what is now known as Claremont Lincoln University in Claremont, California. A brief word on Claremont Lincoln before a few observations about the key role of Phillip Clayton in particular. Claremont Lincoln began as Maclay School

¹⁶ William Willimon writes: “The ‘Jesus Seminar’ reads the New Testament and devises a Jesus that looks suspiciously like a West-Coast professor...”. Quoted in *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry*. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2002. p.163.

¹⁷ Dorrien, p.525.

of Theology in San Fernando, California in the year 1885. For over a hundred years, it's primary affiliation was with the Methodist Church. Along with Methodism in America, it has moved in an increasingly broad and theologically liberal direction. In many cases, on the leading edge of that movement. In the spring of 2011, however, philanthropists David and Joan Lincoln made a \$50 million dollar donation to the school. Effectively changing its name (to Claremont Lincoln) and re-organizing around the vision that the school would re-launch to become the world's first inter-faith seminary. According the L.A. Times, David Lincoln said: "Joan and I are particularly pleased with the idea of creating a multireligious university that reflects the power and potential of the 'Golden Rule'."¹⁸ The website further explains:

"Yes, this is a new kind of university...multireligious...and it's a spark of optimism for the times we live in...We know that religion is not a competitive sport...It's not a game of winner take all. No most of the world's religions have articulated an ethics of reciprocity known in Western society as the Golden Rule. Whatever it's called, this principle puts religions on a path to solutions: a call to step up, name your passion, and take real action."¹⁹

This is the milieu within which Phillip Clayton is operating.

Clayton grew up in conservative Christianity, over the years he moved further to a position of broadly evangelical to the place he occupies today which is enthusiastic and unabashed theological liberalism. In his first public address as Ingraham Professor of Theology, Clayton said it plainly:

"I am a liberal Christian...Liberal Christians are not accustomed to speaking in ringing tones today. But why? We have an equally clear and powerful heritage, albeit one that does not separate black so clearly from white. It's time for a new vision for liberal theology...between church, academy, and the world...[Clayton half apologizes] Forgive my strong response. I am a convert to liberal Christianity, so I bring the passion of the convert rather than the jaundiced eye of the cynical thinker...God knows, in the present political

¹⁸ www.dailybulletin.com/20110515/record-gift-gets-school-started

¹⁹ www.claremontlincoln.org/about . Accessed 11-09-13 @ 3:25pm.

climate liberal Christians *need* passion –earth-shaking passion – when we speak of our faith.”²⁰

Do you hear him? He sounds like Beecher. He sounds like Rauschenbusch. He sounds like Fosdick. His theology is all question marks but his oratory is exclamation points. This will preach into the days ahead. If you doubt me, go to YouTube and look him up. Phillip Clayton. He’s moving to watch in action. He couldn’t be boring if he tried. Only in his late 50’s, I think he has many impactful years ahead of him.

Part of the reason I believe this is because of the inroads that Clayton has been able to make with those in the dissipating but still active Emerging Church Movement. Clayton has befriended national leaders such as Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt (both of whom make their home here in the Cities). Clayton has found a way to offer an olive branch to these guys and I think will provide mentoring as well as institutional stability and strategic help in the days ahead. Phillip Clayton is one theologian to watch.

Conclusion:

Well, we’ve come to the end of the biographical portion of this seminar. All that’s left next hour is to see if we can draw some helpful, practical takeaways from all of our study here. Let’s pause for a break and some discussion and then we’ll begin to land the plane with a handful of real-world, hands-on applications that we can take with us as we go. But right now let’s throw it open to questions, comments, critiques, etc.

²⁰ Clayton quoted in Dorrien, pp.536-537.