The New York Times

The Opinion Pages

What Is Liberal Christianity?

July 16, 2012 1:53 pm

My Sunday column dealt with the post-1960s decline of liberal Christianity in the United States, as manifested by the empty pews and uncertain future of the Episcopal Church. Along the way, I cited the belief "that faith should spur social reform as well as personal conversion" as perhaps the "defining" liberal Christian idea. This prompted a sharp response from the British Baptist theologian Steve Holmes, who describes my identification of liberal Christianity with social reform as "astonishingly misdirected" — in part, he argues, because the link between personal and societal conversion was actually stronger in classical evangelicalism — while suggesting the following definition instead:

> What is liberal Christianity? The question is complex, of course. To give a fully adequate answer would demand reference to renewed confidence in reason, to a high estimate of the possibilities of human endeavour, married to a downplaying of the doctrine of original sin (at least as classically taught), to Biblical criticism, to the turn to history that affected theology as much as every other academic discipline in the early twentieth-century, and to other currents.
>
> That said, most of these currents coalesce in popular expressions of Christianity into a fairly unified stream. So, as a broad approximation, liberal Christianity is Christianity that is acutely alive to the challenges to belief coming from modern philosophy. Kant's denial of knowledge of the noumenal realm apparently made traditional accounts of revelation impossible, and the more-or-less simultaneous rise of Biblical criticism made traditional accounts of revelation profoundly precarious even if possible. Of course, every intellectually serious mode of Christianity has had to respond somehow to these challenges – this was the sense of Stephen Sykes' announcement that we are all liberals today; the particular character of liberal Christianity has been to find a response in accepting the force of the challenges and seeing a profound need for doctrinal reformulation to meet them.
>
> The greatest, and still defining, figure in the story is Schleiermacher, who

> attempted to refound theology on a different basis, an appeal to shared human religious experience … This central methodological place for human experience has remained, in different ways, central to the tradition of liberal theology ever since. If Douthat wants a 'defining idea of liberal Christianity,' the idea that attentiveness and fidelity to human religious experience is more determinative than attentiveness and fidelity to Scripture or church tradition would be a much better starting point than the one he offers.

Upon reflection "defining" was probably the wrong word to use, and I should have described the link between Christian faith and social reform as liberal Christianity's most "influential" idea instead — and been clearer that I was talking specifically about the American context. Liberal Christianity begins exactly where Holmes says it does: In the faith's encounter with the challenges of modernity, and the quest for a ground for contemporary belief that doesn't just rely on rote appeals to the authority of scripture or tradition. However, this quest has gone in different directions in different times and places, and in the United States from the late-19th onward, it found its most important and enduring expression in the Social Gospel idea that Christianity would be vindicated in an age of science and skepticism to the extent that it confronted social evils as well as private sins, and made the kingdom of heaven more visible on earth. Certainly other theological traditions, Catholic as well as evangelical, have linked personal conversion and social reform; certainly liberal Christianity can't be reduced to that link and that link alone. But for a long time, from the era of Walter Rauschenbusch down to the era of Martin Luther King, Jr., the liberal churches had good reason to see themselves as the primary custodians of a socially-engaged Christianity. Indeed, the historical importance of their role explains why many religiously-literate Americans today still simply conflate "liberal Christianity" with "the religion of Christians who are politically liberal." That's far too broad a definition, certainly, and one that gives theologians hives with its capaciousness. But it's also one that reflects the lived reality of American politics and religion for long periods of the twentieth century.

This was not the case everywhere, which is why I think Holmes is naturally resistant to making the association between liberalism and social reform in any way definitional. Consider his capsule history of liberal Christianity's trajectory in the United Kingdom:

> Giving priority to personal experience will inevitably lead to the embracing of an ethic that reflects the general ethic of the culture to which (the majority of) the denomination's members belong. So, liberal Christianity assumed European racial superiority in the nineteenth century; supported imperial warmongering and argued in favour of eugenics in the early decades of the twentieth century … was unwelcoming

> to immigrants from the West Indies in the 1950s; turned in favour of the sexual revolution in the 1960s or soon after; became active in arguing for racial equality in the 1980s; embraced environmental concerns in a major way in the 1990s; and so on. This is not to say any of the positions are wrong or right (I have my opinions...), but to point out that the history of liberal Christian ethical reflection, which is a complex mixture of reactionary and progressive positions, can be very plausibly narrated if we assume that a granting of primacy to human experience is somewhere near the intellectual heart of the movement.

Some of this maps on to the American experience: The United States, too, had its liberal Protestant imperialists and eugenicists, and of course we have our liberal Christian environmentalists today. But the Social Gospel and the civil rights movement are both absent from this story (in this country, liberal Christians were arguing for civil rights long before the 1980s), and when you lose them you lose a huge part of liberal Christianity's direct impact on American religion and public life, not to mention its second-order impact on movements (from WWII and Cold War-era neo-orthodoxy to post-1970s neoconservatism) that were both its critics but also to some extent its practical heirs. Nor, in turn, can you understand the point that the intellectual historian Gary Dorrien makes in the essay that my column quoted, about how the leading liberal Christians of the American past often managed to ground progressive politics on "a gospel of personal faith" expressed "in biblical terms," rather than just on the kind of ecumenical appeals to "shared human religious experience" that are more characteristic of, say, liberal Episcopalianism today. (I think of Bayard Rustin's line about M.L.K., which I quote in my recent book: "I was always amazed at how it was possible to combine this intense, analytical philosophical mind with this more or less fundamental — well, I don't like to use the word 'fundamentalist' — but this abiding faith.") Such a biblical and even dogmatic grounding was possible, I think, precisely because in the American landscape the specific cause of social reform was often more central to the self-definition of religious liberalism than the general prioritization of personal experience that came in with Schleiermacher.

Or at least that's my admittedly non-scholarly interpretation. I recommend Holmes' entire post for a more searching and comprehensive take on these questions that I could offer in my column. But I do think that there are aspects of the American religious experience that he's eliding or overlooking, and that my specific point and his broader thesis are not quite as incompatible as he suggests.

© 2015 The New York Times Company