

I find it interesting that the point I make in my letter to Gordon Michalson of 06/28/00, making use of my alternative to Frei's typology of modern theologies, was already forcibly made, in a different way, in 1971, in "Truth, Truthfulness, and Secularity" (*Christianity and Crisis*, April 5, 1971: 56-60).

In speaking there of the weaknesses of liberal theology, I first distinguish between its "formal" and its "material" weaknesses. I then say that "[i]ts *formal* weakness may be described either as its tendency to be insufficiently critical in establishing the conditions of truth and truthfulness, or as its tendency to confuse the question of truth with the logically quite different question of relevance" (58). This I further explain, then, by arguing that "liberal theologians have too often permitted the terms of theological discussion to be set by secular culture. Hence, it has proved only too easy for them to forget that, if modern culture has relativized the presuppositions of the theological tradition, its own presuppositions are also manifestly relative to a particular cultural and historical situation. Thus liberal theologians have commonly found themselves saying they can no longer maintain this or that element of the tradition—all the while failing to make clear whether the reason for this is that the element in question cannot withstand assessment by critically established criteria of meaning and truth, or *only that modern secular men no longer find it relevant and acceptable*" (59).

Significantly, I go on to illustrate the point by referring to "the widely shared assumption that all existential statements are factual statements and can be true only contingently. If this assumption is made," I argue, "it becomes completely impossible to defend the traditional Christian witness to the reality of God. For, whatever else Christians have meant in asserting that God exists, they have not intended to make a merely factual statement. If God is God, he neither is nor can be a mere fact, and the truth that he exists is not and cannot be a contingent truth" (59).

As for the material weaknesses of liberal theology, I argue that "[c]orrespondingly, the main *material* weakness . . . is that, by being insufficiently critical in establishing its criteria of truth and truthfulness, it has introduced distortions into its interpretations of the Christian witness."

Such distortions, I argue, "have run all the way from an exaggerated stress on the secular and a corresponding obscuring of the properly religious, to a secularistic denial of the religious altogether"(59).

Turning, finally, to the "constructive position" underlying my criticisms, I allow that "[f]ormally, it is a position which maintains that theology's only proper question is the question of truth, as distinct from the question of relevance, and that it can have no hope of succeeding in its task unless it becomes as thoroughly critical of its cultural situation as of the theological tradition" (60).

I might note, in conclusion, my claim that "[t]he great strength of liberal theology is that it has always represented the only possible way forward for Christian theology, given the emergence of a distinctively modern cultural consciousness. . . . Consequently, so far from somehow acting contrary to the witness of faith, the decision of liberal theology [*sc.* to pursue its strategy of double rapprochement over against fundamentalist preservation, on the one hand, and modernist accomodation, on the other] was the only way to act fully in conformity to it. One may also say that, by following this course, liberal theology reenacted in its situation the same kind of resolve present in all the creative periods of theological development, beginning with the New Testament period itself" (58).

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