Particularity, Reality, and Reparative Thinking:
Another Reformation by Peter Ochs

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There are very few books that transcend their subject matter. Those that do address broader and deeper issues than their ostensive topic. They also come to serve as models for others to follow—whether or not they are working on same topic. Finally, they provide substantive insights into not only the topic they explore but the task of writing as a whole.

Peter Ochs’s Another Reformation is one such book. At first glance, his topic might seem relatively narrow—he wants to test a correlation he has noticed between different iterations of “postliberal Christian theology” and a position of “nonsupersessionism” regarding the Jewish faith. To define each of these terms requires that Ochs, a Jewish philosopher, delve into recent developments in contemporary Christian theology and philosophy. In the process, he displays his own formidable theological and philosophical skills, which serve as a model that Christian theologians should follow. Specifically, Ochs provides insights into theological methodology and major theologians that should inform the broader work of theology in the future.

The best way to see the range of this work is to trace Ochs’s definition of “postliberalism” and “nonsupersessionism.” Beginning with the first, Ochs develops an intricate typology to show the different iterations of this movement in contemporary Anglo-American theology.

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Ochs initially defines postliberalism as the third of three epochs. During the “Epoch of Formation,” Christian thought was focused on communal self-definition, which it did primarily by differentiating what Christianity believed as opposed to other religions. The latter were seen “as other—as an offense to its self-definition or a threat to its ideological and social boundaries.” During the “Epoch of Assimilation,” the focus shifted from the particular to the universal as Christians tried to translate their faith into a “single religion of reason.” In the current “Epoch of Postliberalism,” the compromises made during the second epoch, which created a “religion of ethics and enlightenment for the new nation-states and market economies of Europe,” became unviable. However, this does not mean that it is possible, or desirable, to return to the first epoch. In each epoch, theologies develop to reform the religious practices of their day. Consequently, to reiterate the theological answers given in an earlier epoch is to ignore the imperative of repair required today.

The task today is to develop a theology that avoids the binaries dictated by the “law of the excluded middle” regnant in modernity. This means avoiding the dyads of matter/spirit, reason/revelation, intellect/emotion, authority/autonomy, dogmatism/modernism, scripture/tradition, confessional/academic, public/private, church/society, and so on—dyads that plague contemporary theological reflection and modernity in general. It also means reforming the ground from which these dyads grow and flourish. Specifically, Ochs sees this as the tendency to differentiate a novel theological position by portraying others as the logical contradictory of what one advocates. In its place, Ochs articulates a pragmatic, relational logic that is grounded in a context, community, and narrative.

One might be tempted to characterize this logic as hermeneutic, and this is appropriate to the extent that Ochs is advancing a theory of interpretation. However, Ochs justifies his logical project as much on scientific as on humanistic grounds. The dyads that theologians have used to organize their thinking are “unwarranted by empirical evidence,” argues Ochs: “The world is not divided sharply between subjects and objects, knower and the known, mind and matter, the theoretical and the practical, what is active and what is passive.”

1 Ochs, Another Reformation, 4–5.
2 Ochs, Another Reformation, 7.
3 Ochs, Another Reformation, 100.
These binaries are not measurable or observable entities, but ways of seeing that have been shaped by interruptive, and often disruptive, events. As such, they are symptoms of a larger problem that requires a new strategy of repair that, if vital and publically meaningful, will remain productively vague, provisional, and open to better ways of seeing things. “The pragmatist’s task is to teach us how to generate testable hypotheses about the meanings of our otherwise private claims, the epistemological dislocations that may underlie these claims, and, ultimately, how these dislocations may be repaired.”

Postliberal theology, then, is profoundly reparative. It tries to generate from Christian scriptures, traditions, and communal practices a vision that can meet the challenges of a given context shaped by interruptive and disruptive events that put the authority of these resources at risk. This process is, says Ochs drawing from Charles Sanders Peirce, “irremediably vague.” This does not mean that we can say anything we want or nothing for certain. Rather, it characterizes properties that are really knowable, if partially indeterminate. Postliberal theologians make “truth claims about actual entities in the world.” However, they avoid the usual dyads that have plagued modern thinking, and they realize that any claim will always be “partially indeterminate.” Consequently, as a genre, postliberal theology is best understood as witness, meaning that “in plain-speak: one may say ‘Christ shall redeem us from this distress,’ but most details about how specifically Christ ‘redeems us’ are offered only with respect to a historically specific event of repair or redemption, as disclosed by particular witness.”

This emphasis on the interaction between particularity, reality, and reparative thinking differentiates Ochs’s postliberalism from that of other proponents. Consequently, much of his book is spent tracing a genealogy of postliberalism as a movement in the United Kingdom and the United States. Ochs covers major figures such as George Lindbeck, Robert Jenson, Stanley Hauerwas, and John Howard Yoder (working in the US) and Daniel Hardy, David Ford, and John Milbank (working in the UK). Ochs’s analysis of each is painstaking and, at times, one gets the impression that he has lost the forest for the trees.

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4 Ochs, Another Reformation, 100.
5 Ochs, Another Reformation, 107.
6 Ochs, Another Reformation, 107.
However, the main benefit of this granular analysis is that it demonstrates the close attention to detail that one should expect, but does not often see, from the guild of Christian theologians. Ochs develops his account of postliberalism by carefully differentiating the US and UK schools. Both see the task of theology as properly dedicated to ecumenical unity; resolving doctrinal agreements; the interconnection between scripture, community, and sacrament; and the critical retrieval of past approaches as part of its ongoing work of repair. However, each sets about this task differently. In the United States, postliberalism arose as a way to understand doctrine and read scripture so that unity in Christ might become possible and theology might reattain its proper role in the academy as the resource for—and not just the recipient of—critical reflection. Here, the emphasis is lexical, ecumenical, and Christological. In the United Kingdom, postliberalism arose as a way for the church to rethink its public witness in a pluralistic, secular, and veritably post-establishment context. Here, the emphasis is cultural, ecclesial, and pneumatological.

Anglicans in particular will find this typology agreeable, as Ochs highlights the work of Daniel Hardy and David Ford in the UK as exemplars of postliberalism. Indeed (and in light of the particular purposes of this journal), Ochs’s elevation of these Anglican theologians represents one of the more important treatments of contemporary Anglicanism available today. Part of this is due to the fact that Ochs is more concerned with the constructive positions taken by Hardy and Ford than with their *bona fides* vis-à-vis Hooker, Maurice, Temple, and the like. Consequently, it helps the reader see how Hardy and Ford have worked to bring new life and relevance to Anglican theology so that it can stand on its own in wider, less self-concerned, theological discussions.

However, the main purpose for the genealogy Ochs develops for postliberalism is to unpack the second term he explores, nonsupersessionism. Supersessionism is not merely the belief that Christianity is superior to Judaism, or that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and Prophets of the Old Testament, but that the church is the “new Israel.” That is to say, the biblical account of the covenant with Israel has now been fulfilled, transformed, and transcended by the church, which renders all other claims null and void.

Nonsupersessionism, for Ochs, represents only the negation of this ecclesial claim. It does not represent the logically contradictory statement that the “Israel” of the Jews (understood as either political
reality or messianic prophesy) is “God’s (only) covenant partner.”\textsuperscript{7} This nuance is key, because it provides Ochs with a very broad map on which he can plot the postliberal positions he surveys.

Each form of nonsupersessionism Ochs identifies represents an attempt to reconcile Christian claims with recent “events,” the most pressing being “the waning of modernity, the aftermath of the Shoah, the emergence of the Jewish state, new forms of union and disunion in the church, and the new minority status of Christianity within the vast seculum of the West and of the United States of America.”\textsuperscript{8} However, among the theologians he surveys, some do better than others. Lindbeck, Jenson, and Hardy, for example, develop accounts of nonsupersessionism that succeed precisely because their postliberalism is consistent. Others, like John Howard Yoder and John Milbank, fail because there are aspects in their thought that fail to make their projects thoroughly postliberal.

Here, the flaws Ochs sees in both Yoder and Milbank are revealing. At the risk of over-summarizing a detailed argument: Yoder’s free-church ecclesiology is an ahistorical and idealized conceptual lens through which he reads the historical flaws of lived Christianity and Judaism. As a result, he falls into the very modern, dyadic reasoning that postliberalism tries to avoid. What’s more, his criticism of Judaism leads him to imaginatively construct a more palatable form of Judaism that conforms to the free-church ideal. Thus, Ochs finds his account, in the end, a defense, and not denial, of supersessionism.

Milbank’s supersessionism, on the other hand, is the result of flawed thinking rather than a flawed ecclesiology. Milbank shares Ochs’s belief that language is always already in need of repair, as words can never truly and accurately express or represent encountered reality. However, Milbank believes that, as the Incarnate Word, Jesus represents a completing act of repair that puts all other reparative activity to an end. Included in this is “biblical Hebrew,” which is doomed to “remain within the cycle of repetition and error,” in contrast to “Christ alone,” who “brings to humanity the possibility of re-enacting the Adamic activity per se and ultimately of completing the cycle of reparative repetition.”\textsuperscript{9} Thus, Ochs argues that Milbank creates a binary “narrative of origins” justified in foundationalist, and by

\textsuperscript{7} Ochs, \textit{Another Reformation}, 18, n. 12.
\textsuperscript{8} Ochs, \textit{Another Reformation}, 18–19.
\textsuperscript{9} Ochs, \textit{Another Reformation}, 233.
implication modernist, terms. The problem is not that Milbank claims that Jesus is the Incarnate Word, but that Milbank treats this claim as an *a priori* truth. “It need not be supersessionist to claim that Christ alone repairs contradictions in the Old Testament. Such a claim becomes supersessionist only when this recommendation is presented as self-legitimating and therefore as true for any reader whatsoever.”

Ochs displays such virtuosity that it is hard to find deep flaws in his book. However, there are two weaknesses worth noting. First, Ochs’s genealogy of postliberalism underplays his own constructive and normative goals. Specifically, he views the recovery of precritical exegesis by Hans Frei as well as those he influenced—like George Lindbeck (whom he discusses at length), and Francis Watson, Stephen Fowl, Kevin Vanhoozer, Ephraim Radner, and Christopher Seitz (whom he does not)—as an exercise in “postcritical,” but not truly postliberal, theology.

Ochs argues that Frei and his followers employed a flawed and binary hermeneutical practice reflective of the dyads of modernity he deplores. To explain: Bound up in their return to precritical exegesis was an embrace of the necessary intertextuality and typological relationship between the Old and New Testaments, which they saw as key to retrieving a “realistic narrative” of the Bible that had been lost with the advent of modernity. Put simply, to understand who Jesus is requires that we see how the New Testament writers saw him as the fulfillment, or anti-type, of many foreshadowings, or types, in the Old Testament.

However, in the process, Frei and his followers conflated the practice of typological interpretation into a straightforward interpretation of the “plain sense” of scripture. As such, Ochs argues that they confused two distinct aspects in an act of interpretation: “the plain sense, or peshat, and the performative meaning of the text for any finite community of believers.” What any passage of scripture means for us will always involve more than trying to determine its meaning for the New Testament writers.

Drawing from Peirce—and also from his own Jewish interpretive tradition, as the term *peshat* reveals—Ochs argues that every reading of scripture is “triadic”: there is the text, its object/meaning, and

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10 Ochs, *Another Reformation*, 245.
its interpretive community. For example, the crucifixion of Christ as the typological fulfillment of the binding of Isaac recounted in Genesis 22:2–8 represents only two components of a satisfactory interpretive practice: the “‘sign or signifier per se’ (Isaac)” and “the ‘object or meaning’ (Christ).” To be complete, a third term must be present, the “‘interpretant or context of meaning’ (the New Testament).”13 To remain faithful to this interpretive practice requires that we keep in mind the way that the “primordial” community of “Christian interpreters”14 maintained these three components. When interpreters conflate these second and third components, they avoid doing the hard theological work of repair and merely reiterate what the earliest Christians believed.

This criticism rings true, particularly in light of the tendency among Frei’s Anglican and Episcopal followers to generate conservative moral positions in the recent debates over sexuality, doctrine, and the church. These positions have been legitimized as reflecting their reading of the “plain sense” of the text, as Ephraim Radner does in his commentary on Leviticus 18.15 The meaning of any passage of scripture, particularly on topics of moral and ethical significance, cannot rest with the simple designation of foreshadowing and fulfillment.

Although space does not allow for further discussion, I should also note in passing that I am largely sympathetic to the resources Ochs’s approach and methodology offer to comparative theology. Indeed, his approach offers the most fruitful framework I know for comparing different strategies of reading in different faith traditions.

However, I have a lingering concern. For Christians, the New Testament is not merely a record of the reception of revelation, but a source of revelation.Parsed in Peirce’s terms, the New Testament is not merely a historically preserved interpretant, but also a signifier. This semiotic double-layering complicates the interpretive schemes Christians deploy, and it was for this reason that precritical exegeses developed multiple strategies—in addition to typology—to reconcile not only the Old and New Testaments, but the meaning of New Testament texts in which Jesus is remembered as having intensified the demands placed upon believers (such as Jesus’ discourse on the

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14 Ochs, Another Reformation, 26.
15 Ephraim Radner, Leviticus, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2008).
Law in Matthew 5:17–48) as opposed to those where previous commands were abrogated (as in Peter’s vision that all foods are clean in Acts 10:9–16). These earlier strategies include the threefold division of the law; the four senses of scripture; and the bracketing of Jesus’ commands regarding poverty and nonviolence under the counsels of perfection. None of these represent modernist tendencies, since each was developed centuries before modernity developed as an epoch, movement, or mindset.

It is misleading, then, to claim that Frei and his followers failed to rid themselves of the grasp of modernity’s dyads. The interest in these precritical interpretive strategies was fueled by the belief that the purpose of reading the scripture was to fit our world into the Bible’s world, to see our communities as a continuation of the communities mentioned in the New Testament, to make what was true for them our truth. To see the New Testament as merely an archive, if hallowed, of how early Christian communities made sense of things within their own context merely names the distance between text and community that Frei and his followers were eager to close. Indeed, from this perspective, Ochs’s use of Peirce’s triadic scheme of interpretation is yet another symptom, rather than a remedy, of modernism.

The fact that Ochs cannot simply vanquish Frei and his followers intellectually and theologically is a reminder that we often choose hermeneutical strategies for different, perhaps deeper, reasons than, say, determining which one is more rigorous or theologically rich. Among other reasons, I lean toward Ochs primarily because he characterizes the interpretive task as a work of repair, and this corresponds to the work God seems to be calling us to do at this time, in this moment. It captures, in other words, in hermeneutical terms the duty Christians and Jews share to contribute to God’s tikkun olam.

The second weakness in this remarkable book is that it reflects the tight-knit and relatively closed circle that Ochs has cultivated over the course of his career. Ochs devotes, for example, precious space speaking of the “joy” he experienced working with John Milbank at the University of Virginia, and the seriousness with which he took the graduate students’ objections to his critique of Milbank’s theology. He refers to the theologians he covers who have died with the traditional Jewish honorific “of blessed memory,” which conveys to the reader that the dialogue he is pursuing is between personal friends.16

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16 See Ochs, Another Reformation, 19, 21, 27, 29.
From one perspective, these anecdotes and demonstratives help emphasize an aspect of Ochs’s project that, I think, receives too little attention: at its core theology is a dialogical activity best practiced between friends rather than a polemical activity directed against opponents and delivered without empathy or compassion. Standing behind this conviction is the traditional Talmudic study circle (shiur), which fosters conversations and deep interactions among teachers and students that is replete with commentary, replies, questioning, debate, digression, narrative, and repetition. Recovering this intimacy, and fearlessly practicing it, is one of the legacies of his work that Ochs leaves behind. It is perhaps his most trenchant, if implicit, assault on the isolation and dislocation that modernity cultivates, particularly in the academy.

At the same time, the fact that Ochs has woven strands of these discussions into this book creates—ironically with the same breath—a sense of exclusivity. It leaves the impression that the “real” conversation is always taking place elsewhere, at invitation-only events where initiates and masters gather. Having attended some of these meetings, I can say that there is nothing so wonderful as being included in the “in” crowd—if even for a season. However, my concern is not for the feelings, positive or negative, this exclusivity engenders. It is that when they are woven into the discourse of a book, the public nature of theology is compromised. This is so because, whether as dialogue or polemic, theology is properly a public enterprise intended to elevate and inform as wide an audience as possible.

These two weaknesses are far from fatal. However, they do identify pitfalls that theologians coming after Ochs should avoid as they try to continue the work he has done, which is extraordinary. May those who follow in his footsteps—in the Abrahamic religions in particular—receive a double portion of his spirit (2 Kings 2:9).
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