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The Doctrine of Original Sin in Nineteenth-and-Twentieth-Century Methodist Theology

The German Methodist theologian Joerg Rieger proposes a model for four ways of viewing twentieth-century theology based around the psychoanalytic social-critical work of Jaques Lacan.[1] Lacan proposed that there are four discourses going on in Western society that center around four main concepts. Briefly stated, the four discourses are *The Master's Discourse* which is the dominant use of language, ideas and concepts within a society—the seemingly unquestionable assumptions that are taken for granted; *The University's Discourse* which is the search for objective and unbiased knowledge outside political or social considerations; *The Hysteric's Discourse* which is the language of those who cannot reconcile themselves to the dominant discourse and feel that they have no identity or mooring within the society; and *The Analysts' Discourse* which is the work of the those who are able to step outside the dominant structure. Rieger redeploys this framework to analyze the four main theological movements in the past two centuries. I will not go into depth exploring Rieger's moves and proposals here, but I do find his general taxonomy to be helpful in broadly describing some general trends and for providing helpful definitions of the general movements. In defining what the theologians were committed to and what they ignored or neglected (Rieger would say that it was *repressed*, following Freud and Lacan's psychology) the helpful insights as well as the problems of the various groups become clear.

1. Joerg Rieger, *God and the Excluded: Visions and Blindspots in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis,MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2000-11-01), 129.

This paper will explore the four movements by briefly looking at the theological anthropology of one major figure of each movement—Methodist in all cases but one. The focus will be on how the doctrine of original sin plays out (or is discarded) in the work of each representative thinker. My work here is predominantly descriptive and analytic—I will endeavor to faithfully represent the thinker. The synthetic work will be in showing how the various thinkers differ and what implications that may have on their work. My constructive comments will come at the end.

Wesley considered the doctrine of original sin to be constitutive of Christianity, that if one were to abandon the doctrine, then the whole of the rest of the doctrines would crumble around. Indeed it is this very doctrine that separates the Christian from the heathen. While Wesley was often known to use a bit of hyperbole in his preaching, there are very few places where he made a claim this grand:

> But here is the shibboleth: Is man by nature filled with all manner of evil? Is he void of all good? Is he wholly fallen? Is his soul totally corrupted? Or, to come back to the text, is "every imagination of the thoughts of his heart evil continually" Allow this, and you are so far a Christian. Deny it, and you are but a heathen still.[2]

While Boards of Ordained Ministry may still use the doctrine as a kind of shibboleth, does it ever get preached on Sunday? Anecdotal evidence seems to indicate that even though United Methodist clergy say they believe in it, few really do—at least as Wesley construed it above. Anecdotal evidence, however, is not good scholarship. Instead, thrusting myself back into *The*

2. John Wesley, "Original Sin," (1759):.

University's Discourse, I will look for evidence of how the doctrine has been taught and presented by Methodist theologians.

The Master's Discourse: Neo-Orthodoxy and Karl Barth

Rieger associates *The Master's Discourse* with the neo-orthodox. The "master signifier" in Lacan's terms is Barth's God as wholly-Other. "The thousands of pages of *Church Dogmatics* are proof of this effort to shape dogmatic discourse. [...] The doctrines of the church are not just perpetuated but reshaped in the light of a specific set of master signifiers. In Barth's discourse the encounter with the Otherness of God, the Word of God, reshapes the words of both the Bible and doctrinal tradition." Given that the neo-orthodox movement ultimately gained little traction in the United Methodist Church due to its Calvinistic tendencies, there is not a representative Methodist theologian to work with, as such I will briefly sketch Barth's theology in order to provide contrast with the other three.

The Lacanian master signifier in Barth's work is "God is Wholly Other." That is, finite and created human reason can never approach the infinite Creator. Over against the Liberal Protestant tradition and its trust in human reason, sufficient knowledge of God "can never be completely secured by the human self's religious ambitions and its search for identity with God."[3] Barth deconstructs the very notion of the individual self—the self cannot make contact with the Divine unless the Divine first speaks. Through reading the texts of the Church—not in a naïve way but in a way that 'reads the reader'—the finite self can search for Truth. "Thus,

3. Rieger, "God and the Excluded: Visions and Blindspots in Contemporary Theology," 53.

while Barth searches for a deeper truth or an 'inner text,' he is aware that 'this inner text can be found only within the outward text. [...] Barth's hermeneutics shatters both the confidence of the modern self that it has access to the truth and the confidence of the traditional dogmatic that the inner text and the outward text are always the same."[4]

Original sin, for Barth, is the total corruption of human kind, following Calvin. "We are dealing not with any *corruptio*, but with the *corruptio optimi* ... the selling and enslavement of the good man and his nature and all the actions of his nature to the service of evil and the work of his own pride."[5] Original sin is the enslavement to sin, not a transmitted guilt or volitional predisposition. For Barth, the idea that we could be held responsible for a sin which we did not properly commit is unjust. Inherited sin cannot properly be considered ones own act. Reading the Genesis 2-3 account as saga, rather than history, Barth sees in the text the radical estrangement that comes whenever we put ourselves on too high a level; pride is the real sin that separates us from God—the Wholly Other to whom we owe everything.

Even in his radical denial of self when it comes to knowledge, Barth insists that the self is the active agent in sin. Hereditary sin violates justice since the self is the object of condemnation and punishment. According to John Webster, "What Barth protests against is not that sin is derived, but against the view that its derivation bypasses deliberation and choice, so that it becomes more easily describable as a disease than as moral evil."[6] If original

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4. Ibid., 54-55.

5. Cited in: John B. Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (London: T. & T. Clark Publishers, 2004-11-11), 72.

sin is transmitted, then it ceases to be real evil and instead becomes an unescapable condition. No one blames the blind man for being born blind, nor is he held accountable for bumping into something which he could not see. If sin is akin to inborn blindness then the real evil that comes from sinning does not belong to the individual, but to a condition for which the individual cannot justly be blamed. Yet, sin is a radical evil which separates humanity from proper relationship with the Creator. Sins, in the sense of individual acts, are the things which God does not will. Since God is the source all being, sin is a drive toward nothingness. Sinful acts are those which lead to non-being, death and separation from God. This separation is absolute and can only be overcome by God's action—which took place once, for all, in Christ.

Reinhold Niebuhr, much less generous to Barth than Webster, draws the line between the Liberal Protestants (discussed below) and the neo-orthodox in this way:

> In the modern Barthian revival of Lutheran orthodoxy the religious experience is practically exhausted in the sense of contrition. The emphasis upon the difference between the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man is so absolute that mans is convicted, not of any particular breaches against the life of the humanity community, but of being human and not divine. Thus, to all intents and purposes, creation and the fall are practically identified and, everything in human history being identified with evil, the 'nicely calculated less and more' of social morality lose all significance.[7]

Being created, being "the other" apart from God, is in itself sufficient to explain what the tradition has held was a consequence of transmitted sin. Yet, in denying that the individual

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6. Ibid., 75.

7. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study of Ethics and Politics (Library of Theological Ethics)* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002-01-01), 68.

self has anything to say about the Wholly Other, does that completely undercut our theological task? Clearly theology is talk *about* God, which is not about us, but it is always talk *by* us about God. The Wholly Other requires an (small-o) other. If Niebuhr's reading is correct and Barth equates creation and the fall, then the reality of Sin (and sins) in the world can only be ascribed to God. In focusing on the reality and depth of sin in the world, does Barth lose the other half of the story in which humanity was created in the *imago Dei*—the very image and likeness of God?

The Hysteric's Discourse: Liberal Protestantism and Albert Outler

Barth's focus on the Otherness of God arises from what he perceives to be an exaggerated attention to the possibility of the individual self's ability to reach God. If the *imago Dei* is missing from Barth, it is over-present in the theology of the self, Liberal Protestantism. Lacan's *Hysteric's Discourse* is the discourse of the self searching for identity in an incoherent world. Rieger renames it the *Discourse of the Self* and defines it as the problem of the "enlightenment and the emergence of the middle class, asserting its powers in various political revolutions and the development of the capitalist markets during the past 250 years."[8] Schleiermacher, the father of Liberal Protestantism, according to Rieger, "really wants [...] to arrive at a new dogmatic. This is the goal of liberal systematic theology: the whole range of dogmatics must be rewritten on the grounds of the self's selection of key signifiers in theology." Whereas Barth turned away from the self and tried to use God alone as the single

8. Rieger, "God and the Excluded: Visions and Blindspots in Contemporary Theology," 131.

signifier for theology, Liberal Protestantism was the project of using our signifiers to speak of God. For Schleiermacher, this was the turn to individual experience and our feeling of absolute dependance on something beyond ourselves. The individual became the center of theology—we know God not through the community which gave shape to the tradition of the Church or through the dogmatic teachings. The Methodist theologian Albert Outler would define the Enlightenment credo, which serves as the background music of the Liberal Protestant tradition, in four points:

> 1. Man is not natively depraved.
> 2. The end of life is life itself; the good life on earth instead of the beatific life after death.
> 3. Man is capable, guided solely by the light of reason and experience, of perfecting the good life on earth.
> 4. The first and essential condition of the good life on earth is the freeing of men's minds from the bonds of ignorance and superstition.[9]

The Liberal Protestants were interested in making Christianity acceptable to the "cultured despisers." By accepting the rules of the academy, being willing to set aside traditional interpretations of the Church's teachings (especially the Biblical material) as superstition which was suited to another, less enlightened, age, the Liberal tradition undercut its own moorings. The search for stability and security that Schleiermacher found was the same as Descartes: the self. Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* became Schleiermacher's 'I experience, there for God is.' While Albert Outler is generally considered to be a Liberal Protestant, his true position is far more complex. But his early work *Psychotherapy and the Christian Message* is a

9. Albert C. Outler, *Psychotherapy and the Christian Message* (New York: Harper Chapel Books, 1954), 39.

great example of the late Liberal tradition at work. What follows is not an exhaustive summary of Outler's career, but an evaluation of his theology at one point as an example of the Liberal Protestant position.

The formulation of the Enlightenment credo that Outler defined above was set up to show the contrast between the Enlightenment position and the late Liberal Protestant position. Oulter hints at the tension when he says:

> I wish to suggest that, while the *practical* wisdom of psychotherapy is a valid resource for the Christian care of souls, its humanist and naturalist *perspective* must be rejected. [...] The Christian must stand firm on Christian ground, and not be overly impressed by claims that the *faith* of psychotherapy has the same scientific authority as its clinical axioms.[10]

While Outler wants to reject the non-scientific 'quasi-religious faith' of psychotherapy, the scientific and practical parts of psychology can and should be held. Science, the product of individual experience taken on no authority other than the individual's reason, is seen as the proper model for humanity so long as it does not become a faith. The claim is that Christianity—understood as Outer understands it—is as reasonable as the new religion of psychotherapy on the terms of science itself.[11] Outler rejects the four points that defined the Enlightenment because they are a non-scientific faith on no more stable scientific ground than Christianity. So, what is Outler's understanding? Three main points come up, "(1) the human

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10. Ibid., 45.

11. Ibid., 125. "Christians, if they truly qualify as experts in the field, may share in the empirical process of amassing significant data and testing them both by current techniques and new ones—but only by the same canons of scientific method, since within its operative field, there is only *one* adequate method of scientific verification."

quandary (sin), (2) the human possibility (salvation), and (3) the ordering of life (ethics)."[12] Sin, for Outler is "the human quandary," the condition in which mankind finds itself. A person is divided against their own sense of self. Freud spoke of a person as not being 'master in their own house' with the unconscious (or, later, the *id* and *superego*) really controlling the actions of the conscious person without them knowing it. Outler frames this internal division in terms of alienation from the self, "the very core of human selfhood [...] is irresponsible and uneducable."[13] The alienated self is inauthentic, unaware of its own drives and motives. Aware of its own mortality, a person is faced with a dilemma: "the span of life is too short for the fulfillment of life" if life ends at bodily death.[14] If the religion of psychotherapy is correct, then we can never be fulfilled; the best we can hope for is a reduction in frustration.

Outler thinks that original sin is the Christian teaching that the secularist, humanist faith can least abide. The notion of sin requires a god with whom mankind is in relation. *Original* sin destroys mankind's self-sufficiency, its ability to cure itself and demands that God is more than a projection of hope in the darkness. "It is necessary, therefore, for any secularist, humanist religion to interpret the human quandary in such a way as to deny the notion of sin [...] The recognition of man's estrangement from God is a confession of God's righteous rule in human life and **man's radical dependence** upon Him, even in the estranged relation of sin."[15]

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12. Ibid., 53.

13. Ibid., 111.

14. Ibid., 124.

15. Ibid., 131. Emphasis mine, demonstrating the return to Schleiermacher's notion of absolute dependence.

Contrasting the secularist, humanist faith with the Christian faith, Outler frames the Christian view of the human quandary this way:

> The Christian interpretation of the human quandary passes through the levels of maladjustment and deviation in behavior to the inner focus of selfhood and our primal relation to God. Man's real difficulty—the difficulty which he cannot remedy by and for himself—lies in his estrangement from God, and estrangement which is radical in its penetration into all aspects of his existence, an estrangement which has come about because of influences that condition a man's existence but in which a man just finally acknowledge his own responsibility and share. The basic quality of this estrangement is *unfaith*, *mistrust*.[16]

The *imago Dei* is not overly mentioned, but the doctrine is recast as humanity's primal relation to God. Sin's effect is estrangement from God and sin, rather than being pride in Barth's sense; it is a lack of faith and trust in God and a misplaced trust in our own abilities—but trusting our own abilities, as shown above, only gets us to a reduction in our quandary and frustration, not to our ultimate fulfillment. "Men surmise that they can secure themselves from the ever-present threats of insecurity by their own powers of freedom, love and reason—and thus they find it hard to trust and rely on the uncertain providence and grace of God."[17] Trusting in God, having faith, seems from the humanist position, to be a loss of freedom—either giving up our reason or limiting our choices. Yet, within the Liberal Protestant tradition, we simply have to trust—having faith is completely within our power. Or, as Outler frames it, summarizing earlier strands of the Liberal tradition, "Liberal Protestantism developed the general view that

16. Ibid., 132.

17. Ibid., 133.

sin is essentially ignorance—that as men come *to know* God and His love, they will love Him in return and work righteousness in His Kingdom."[18]

Since belief in God is as rational as non-belief, the Christian claim is that man does not love right because he does not know right; if we knew God for who God is, if we had adequate experiences of God (or understood the experiences correctly) then we would be transformed/ informed and able to love aright. Outler moves beyond the classic Liberal position and redefines sin not as ignorance, but the love of error. What is more, even the most brutish experience moments where they know this, even as they deny it:

> There is, finally, the dark shadow of incompleteness and defect which even the insensitive occasionally sense in their lives, in the presence of great goodness, or deep crisis. And these distortions and mutiliation of human lives which are not explained away by the hypothesis of sin as ignorance and error. It is, rather, the *love of error*—and for this there is no rational explanation.The humanist's hope that man, for all his failings thus far, will yet master the order of reason and the art of love, and thus become the ever more adequate self-savior—this, too, is the sure sign of titanism, the favorite sin of modern man.

The evidence is in. If the humanists would only follow their own science, they would see that mankind has thus far not been master in its own home and stand no chance of becoming so, by their own reckoning, Outler turns Freud back on the Freudians. By proclaiming that man is not master in his own house, Freud fatally undercuts the Enlightenment belief in the sufficiency of individual reason to arrive at truth. If we can never know our motives, which distort our reason, then does reason ultimately fail us? Outler uses Freud to proclaim humanism as founded in non-scientific faith on par with Christianity. Yet, within us is the ability to sense

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18. Ibid., 135.

this deep problem, or experience transcendent joy—for which Freud cannot rationally account—and thus Christianity is not only an option on par with humanism, but superior in explanatory power.

Rieger's criticism of the Liberal church is that there is a fundamental failure to recognize the other, both the Wholly Other and the not-like-us in our own neighborhoods and around the world. "The modern self, educated and middle class, feels as if it understands others better than they do themselves."[19] The inclusiveness of the Liberal Church is a one-way street, anyone is welcome, so long as they come to us, and assimilate to us—so long as they submit to our community "and thus promise not to create trouble."[20] The self, being the ultimate standard bearer for reasonableness and the truth (my experiences are the only ones that count since they are the only ones I can trust) demands that others be like the self or they are dismissed as being non-rational; if they were rational they would understand their experiences in the same way I do.

The Analyst's Discourse: Liberation Theologies

That other selves are valid selves seems to be a self-evident truth, yet the entire modern project as founded by Descartes is based on the rejection of authority and trust only in what we come to know ourselves. This corner stone is the one which Freud struck when he

19. Rieger, "God and the Excluded: Visions and Blindspots in Contemporary Theology," 29.

20. Ibid., 37. Hidden in here is one of the fault-lines in Rieger's proposal since submission to community is actually the move made by the University's Discourse. Here we start to see the surplus of the structure—'small a' in Lacan's terms—that Rieger fails to take into account.

said that the consciousness is not master in its own house. If we are blind to our own desires and motives—if the things which most drive us are those which we most deeply repress—then how can we trust even ourselves? Outler's proposal that psychotherapy—when stripped of its secularist, humanist faith—is helpful because the analyst is a third party who can help the self discover what it is that they have repressed. Of course, most of us, most of the time, are reluctant to seek help, especially if we do not recognize that we have a problem. Getting an alcoholic to see the damaging effects of their drinking is not an easy task—getting a modern individual to admit that they really are not able to access truth on their own seems to me to be equally difficult.

Lacan's notion here is the *Analyst's Discourse*. Rieger renames it "the turn to others" or "the discourse of the marginalized" and identifies it not with psychotherapy, but with the various theologies of liberation.[21] "What is repressed may differ; yet in any given society structures of repression already exist. In patriarchy, Lacan notes, women are put into this position. In capitalism it is the working classes and the poor. [...] The repressions that produce the other point to one's hidden desires."[22] Rieger's thesis is that if we identify the repressed other, we can identify our own repressed desires and overcome our repressions, liberating ourselves and those we have repressed. Those who are normative can never fully see outside

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21. Ibid., 152. Here again we see another fracture in Rieger's system. Outler's use of psychotherapy seems better suited to this task than turning to some vague notion of the marginalized—therapists are trained to look for signs of repression and neurotic behaviors and in how to deal with them. Asking "others" seems to be a blind gamble at best.

22. Ibid., 153.

the status quo and find new possibilities for full life. "The advantage of this position, according to Lacan, is that women, unlike men, can never be made to fit completely into the system and are thus not simply functions of the powers that be."[23] In Lacan's *Analysts' Discourse* the analyst assumes a role outside the main discourse and looks for the master signifiers—the gods—which the modern self follows without knowing it. Rieger's expectations are grand, to say the least:

> Theology turning to others is able to give a sharper, more challenging and perspective reading of liberal theology than the other theological modes since the other is in the position of the unconscious truth in the discourse of the modern self and knows things that the self prefers not to know. Yet if the self is put in a position where it has to listen to its own truth in relation to the theological turn to others, theology might finally be able to enter a new age, opening up the limits of contemporary theological reflection.[24]

Returning to my analogy of the alcoholic, if the modern self is unwilling to listen, how can it be forced? Children of alcoholics are rarely able to "do an intervention" on their parent even as adults. The repressed/oppressed in the relationship remains there.[25]

Justo González, a Latino liberation theologian and Methodist pastor defines sin as what stands between the purpose of creation and the present reality.[26] The Biblical narrative is not a

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23. Ibid., 154.

24. Ibid., 155-156.

25. As a child of an alcoholic, I attend "Adult Children of Alcoholics" (ACOA) meetings from time to time. Even when the child is not themselves an alcoholic, they are usually in deep psychic pain themselves and repress more than they usually acknowledge. While I find comfort and companionship in listening to some fellow ACOAs share their truths, many are so damaged that their version of truth simply can't be reconciled with the world as I know it. Repression damages "the other" and this can limit how helpful their voice is. This is just an extension of note 21 above.

26. Justo L González and Zaida Maldonado Perez, *An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Nashville:

historical account, but an affirmation that evil is real and a destructive power in the world. Critical of the Liberal tradition and Barth (as read by Webster), González thinks that a non-inherited account of original sin, "does not seem to take into account the full scope and power of sin, which does not depend only on our actions, but goes far beyond our own freedom and decisions."[27] González reaffirms the position that sin corrupts the entire person and that it is not actions, but a deep condition, "a slavery from which we cannot free ourselves. Whoever sees sin only as an evil action, apart from the very condition in which one lives, does not really understand its full power."[28]

Sin is not only the human condition, but it is a self-sustaining condition that builds structures which ensure its continuation. Sins may be individual, but they are also social. Racism, for example, is a sin that gets disguised behind other, seemingly legitimate worries—immigration, language and culture. The Social Gospel, which was a product of Liberal Protestantism pointed in this direction, as González notes:

> This theme of the structural character of sin was taken up during the nineteenth century, and on into the twentieth, by the proponents of the Social Gospel in order to point out that many of the problems of society are not because of those who suffer their consequences—the poor, the unemployed, for example—but rather to sinful structures. Thus, if there is unemployment, the reason for this is not that people are lazy, but that the economic system produces and sometimes even requires unemployment.[29]

Abingdon Press, 2002-07), 70.

27. Ibid., 71.

28. Ibid., 72.

29. Ibid., 73. Here again I point out another crack in Rieger's framework. If the Social Gospel (via Liberal Protestantism) was aware of the institutional nature of sin, how could it be as

Yet, González is not willing to give over to the Liberal Protestant notion that our experiences are as veridical as they think. "Nor is sin to be confused with those things for which we feel guilty. Conscience is not untainted by sin, and therefore it too does not know what sin is. Furthermore, sinful conscience is shaped by sinful society, and it too reflects the values and mores which that society seeks to impose"[30] Sin is much more pervasive and corrosive than the Liberal Protestant tradition would recognize, cutting to the core of our conscience and reason. And, it goes even deeper still, right into our sense of piety, "there is a more insidious form sin takes, particularly among women and oppressed minorities. This is to deny our for-otherness by false humility. When [in a faculty meeting] my contributions were ignored, I chose to remain silent. It would be unchristian to call attention to what they were doing."[31] This remaining silent was sinful for González because he should have spoken up but remained silent out of for-otherness and in doing so deprived the others on the committee the opportunity to be for-other to him.

Every good analyst knows that the analyst is also a person and has their own repressed issues. Lacan himself underwent years of analysis. If the liberation notion of sin examined here

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narcissistic as Rieger claims? Is it simply a case of do-goodie colonialism, blind to the structures, or is González right in saying that the Social Gospel movement identified and challenged these structures?

30. Justo L González, *Manana: Christian Theology From a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990-07), 135. Wesley would struggle with this, at least once prevenient grace was admitted. I think Wesley would hold that our conscience, once awakened, is veridical. Maybe he would allow that it is in need of formation through attention to the various means of grace. That is another essay.

31. Ibid., 137.

is true, then what structures come to bear on González? What are his own repressed issues? How has his conscious been distorted to as to not let him be aware of the sin around and in himself? I raise these questions not simply to deconstruct the liberation position, but because it seems to me that it is an end run at a kind of Humean skepticism—we can't know because we are blinded by sin, so all we can do is ask others who are equally blind, but in different ways, what they see. I find this position to be deeply unsatisfying and to deny the *imago Dei* that remains under our sin. Barth insisting: "Christ! The Wholly Other to whom we should turn!" does not seem to get us out of this quagmire any more than the Liberal saying that our reason is adequate to the task. The liberation position could reasonably claim that the notion of Christ to which Barth has turned is just a construct dependent on a hermeneutic that is as much a form of narcissism as the Liberal's appeal to their own reason. The plethora of liberation theologies, each with their own special-interests, seems to be indicative that what they are doing is simply turning to themselves in reaction to the Liberal's claiming a normative status.

The University's Discourse: Post-liberal theology and William J. Abraham

Lacan's fourth discourse is the *University's Discourse*, in this discourse the individual is put to use for the production of knowledge. Language and its uses become the central focus and the "master signifiers" are ultimately repressed. In Lacan's breakdown these deep drives are hidden behind claims to objectivity, impartiality and "the facts." As we saw with Outler's criticisms of psychoanalysis, even "scientific" theories have implicit faith claims.[32] Rieger

32. Yet another place where there seems to be a fracture in Rieger's analysis.

associates this discourse with postmodernity and "the turn to language and the text." His focus is on George Lindbect's treatment use of scripture as formative of individuals, what has become known as post-liberal theology. Instead of starting with individuals having experiences of God, a Wholly Other God, or the marginalized, the post-liberal movement "starts with cultural and linguistic structures. [...] According to Lindbect, initiation into any religion, into the Christian faith in particular, and even into theology can be compared to the learning of a language."[33] Whereas Liberal theology had an implicit assumption that God was on our side since, being formed in the *imago Dei* our reason must operate correctly, post-liberal theology shifts authority to the texts, which serve to author the individuals: "God is first of all on the side of the text."[34]

Moving beyond Lindbect, the Irish Methodist theologian, William J. Abraham argues that it is the entirety of the canonical resources of the Church which carry authority and author life. To reframe Rieger's claim about Lindbect, for Abraham God is first of all on the side of the side of humanity—not in Adam, but in Christ as constituted in the Church. The Church's role is ultimately soteriological, the aim is the redemption and salvation of people. The teachings of the Church are not located in a single book, nor even necessarily in written form. Icons, hymns, liturgies and even stories of the lives of the saints are valid canonical sources of material which lead people to salvation. To get at what is in play, compare what Rieger says with the richness of a greatly expanded set of doctrinal sources:

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33. Rieger, "God and the Excluded: Visions and Blindspots in Contemporary Theology," 74.
34. Ibid., 78.

> Lindbect's understanding of doctrine clarifies the whole of what is at stake. Christian doctrines are neither propositional nor experiential truth claims. The doctrines of the church are "communally authoritative teachings regarding beliefs and practices that are considered essential to the identity or welfare of the group in question." What counts is their use by the community of the church and how they shape the Christian life. Doctrine functions like the grammar of a religion; they grow out of actual languages, summarize them, and, while providing stability, maintain a dynamic character.[35]

If the grammar is allowed to include icons and liturgies, which are far more than propositional truth claims, the claims made by the tradition cannot be limited to points of doctrine. The grammar functions not (primarily) to reveal the truth, but to inculcate the knowledge, practices, habits and dispositions by which one is saved. Learning the language of Christianity goes far beyond being able to give an accounting of the importance of original sin in the systematic framework.

While Lindbect's notion of the text resists any simple formulation which can become autocratic, Abraham's expansion into the entire canonical heritage of the Church ensures that there will always be self-critical reflection. Through baptism, one becomes a Christian and takes on the identity of the entire Church—a member of the Body of Christ. The turn to self, the turn to the marginalized other and the turn Wholly Other are all one in the same through turning to the canonical heritage of the Church. Freud's notion that the conscious is not master in its own house, that what is repressed always resurfaces, has a place in this theology as well—if a group within the Church tends towards a radical misinterpretation of the canonical tradition, say by investing a literal reading of certain passages of scripture with undo

35. Ibid., 83.

importance, then other passages of scripture, the liturgical practices or the history of the Church can and should question the legitimacy of that groups reading of the text. The room for freedom of interpretation is great indeed, but it is not absolutely relative.

On the doctrine of original sin, Abraham holds that Augustine, the formulator of the doctrine, is not a canonical theologian of the Church—he is one saint among many, a great one to be sure, but not a canonical theologian.[36] To claim that original sin is the official teaching of the ecumenical Church is simply wrong. Other saints, such as Irenaeus, held differing views about the condition of humanity. Original sin has been a profoundly powerful doctrine that a large portion of the community has found useful and compelling, but its authority is not absolute. Augustine's worry was that without something like original sin, Christ would not be necessary for salvation. If another means of ensuring Christ's necessity—without appealing to a transmitted stain upon human nature—could be found, then Augustine's worry would be appeased and original sin could be set aside.[37]

One can take sin to be radically pervasive and damaging, as González does, and still hold that our consciences are functional enough to tell right from wrong in most cases. That our capacities are distorted by sin is a general consensus within the community, how pervasive that distortion is is an open question. What matters for Abraham's project is that sin is

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36. Most of the comments made concerning Abraham's theology come from his lectures on Feb 6 & 8, 2008.

37. Given that many contemporary Christians are not willing to claim in a strong sense that Christ in the person of Jesus is necessary for salvation, does the community really need to hold to original sin anyways?

damaging and inescapable without the assistance of Christ, through the Church. Again, Rieger on Lindbect:

> In another step the discourse of the tradition also leads to the formation of a new self. It is now clear how Lindbect's project is diametrically opposed to the liberal theological paradigm. While in that paradigm the self sought to restructure the language of the church, here the language of the church aims at restructuring the self.

Abraham's focus on the soteriological nature of the Church and his revisionist reading of Wesley as an ascetic, rather than folk or practical theologian lines right up with what Rieger has to say about Lindbect. The purpose in engaging the canonical heritage of the Church is for the self to be reformed into a member of Christ. This ongoing evangelical project takes time. Wesley, Barth and González are correct to point out the radical importance of sin and that unaided reason is insufficient for our salvation—we can't learn what we need to learn without God leading us to God—learning of the gulf is also insufficient. Having an individual experience of radical dependence, as Lindbect would point out, is the goal, not the beginning. Abraham would go farther, having the experience is but one point in the process. The experience can only be had when the foundation has been laid, that is, when the individual has learned the grammar of the experience.[38] The language of sin and separation from God is necessary to know that where we are is not where God wants us to be.

Conclusion: A bit of synthesis and reflection.

38. There are, of course, exceptional cases on record. The broad swaths I'm cutting here are the typical case.

While I find Rieger's taxonomy to be a helpful starting point, I have noted in several places where I see the beginning of fractures. I hated this book the first two times I read it. It took reading Lacan in depth before I came to understand what Rieger was up to. Now, I think he may be onto something, but he'll need to shift his analysis. I could see myself using this in and Intro to Theology course, with a lot of background and preface work to prepare the students.

If the Outler of the 1950's is an attempt to rescue the Liberal tradition from the Barthian critique, as I have presented it here, then Rieger will need to take this into account. If, as Lacan and Freud both noted, the Other is the other side of the self, does Rieger's turn to the other make sense? The way I formulated the Church in the final section seems to me to solve all of Rieger's worries. The Church as always other and self and Wholly Other, both human and divine and never just me, yet I'm part of it too... there is something in there.

It seems to me that the conspicuous sanctity of the saints counts as evidence in the Liberal tradition, if the saints are admitted as a source of evidence into the dialog. If Lacan and Freud can admit personal behavior, observed through (purportedly) scientific methods, it seems inconsistent to exclude the saints from this data. If Lacan can use texts to analyze the societal unconscious, why not the texts of the saints?

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