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Postliberal Theology

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Postliberal Theology

Ronald T. Michener

Postliberal theology is an overarching, but not monolithic, narrative-focused theological sensibility that moves beyond the conservative/liberal divide. Not to be confused with political 'postliberalism' – a response to liberal, market-driven economics – postliberal theology is a distinctive theological sensibility. It affirms tradition, experience, and propositions when doing theology, and emphasizes context and community more than historical-critical, empirical, or rationalistic epistemological theological concerns.

This article will provide an overview of postliberal theology by focusing on its background (including its identification with the 'Yale School'), key figures, major themes, concerns, tendencies, and theological agendas. It will begin by addressing key themes found in postliberal theology that include its non-foundational and non-apologetic character, intratextuality, community-shaped grammar, ecumenical openness, and its focus on the narrative of God's people in scripture in the story of Israel and the Christian faith community. It will then provide a brief profile of key philosophical and sociological scholars who are influencers of postliberal sensibilities in theology. These include Ludwig Wittgenstein, Thomas Kuhn, Michael Polanyi, Alasdair MacIntyre, Clifford Geertz, Peter Berger, and Thomas Luckmann. This will be followed by considering several key theologians who are proponents of postliberal theology, including Karl Barth, Hans Frei, Paul Holmer, David Kelsey, George Lindbeck, and Stanley Hauerwas, among others. The article will then consider some critical engagements and appropriations of postliberal theology as seen in the work of Kevin J. Vanhoozer, James K. A. Smith, John Milbank, and David Burrell. In conclusion, consideration will be given to implications and potential applications of postliberal theology for the contemporary Christian church.

Keywords: Postliberal theology, Intratextuality, Generous orthodoxy, Narrative theology, Postmodern theology, Postfoundationalism

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1 Introduction

Postliberal theology is a theological sensibility that moves beyond the liberal-conservative divide. It is 'post-' liberal because it is not swayed by tendencies of liberal theology to seek modern responses to theology and scripture in view of modern advances in empiricism, rationalism, and historical criticism. Although liberal theology has diverse expressions, as R. R. Reno notes, 'they are all characterized by openness to and even enthusiasm for the latest intellectual and social trends' (Reno 2018). Postliberal theology is also diverse, with some non-systematic 'family resemblances' (Root 2018: 402) that manifest a lack of enthusiasm for modern trends of liberal theology. At the same time, as we will see, it is greatly influenced by various modern thinkers who are challenging the foundations upon which modernity is built. In this sense, it is also 'pre-' liberal in its motivations. Postliberal theology is also postconservative, in that its responses to liberal theology do not emphasize propositionalism or evidentialism as responses to liberal theology, (which are also, ironically, embedded in modernist presuppositions). Postliberal theology, on the other hand, is committed to the contextual and particular 'grammar' of Christian community, rather than to an overarching, neutral, objective religious truth. It is 'intratextual' in its approach, looking toward its own narrative and community framework for the interpretation of scripture and the ongoing interpretive formation of doctrine in the church.

Postliberal theology has often been called the 'Yale school' of theology, due to several theologians from Yale Divinity school who held common postliberal theological sensibilities (Frei, Lindbeck, Kelsey, Placher), in contrast to the liberal theology of what has been called the 'Chicago School', represented by theologians from the University of Chicago Divinity School (Reno 2018). Although there are certainly overlapping and interconnected perspectives among these scholars, there is no formal 'Yale School' of postliberal theology, nor does postliberal theology depend uniquely on the theologians from Yale to define its perspectives and practices.

2 Key themes, tendencies, and characteristics

Before considering the key influencers and major proponents of postliberal theology, this section will first describe the major themes and primary characteristics of postliberal theology in a more generalized fashion.

2.1 Nonfoundational and non-apologetic

Rather than bolstering Christian beliefs from rational, foundational principles, postliberal theology begins from the community context of faith. Theological liberalism emphasizes finding a general, common, and integrating ethical, existential, or ideological motif for

religion. By contrast, postliberal theology finds its reality in the particular practices of faith within the church (Pecknold 2005: 4–5). This being the case, postliberal theology is not interested in apologetic efforts to substantiate beliefs in Christianity, as this would be a misunderstanding of the nature of Christian beliefs themselves. If apologetics and foundational principles are made central to the nature of doctrine, then one has placed an epistemological structure upon faith that is foreign to the specific nature of that faith. That is, one has allowed modern notions of justification to set the agenda, and imposed those upon the biblical narrative, rather than allowing the biblical narrative to set its own agenda from its own specific context. It is wrongheaded, according to postliberal theologians, to demand that Christian theology conform to the same standards required from the sciences, thinking that similar requirements of verification must apply to theology.

At the same time, historical events and apologetics are not completely discounted for postliberal theology, but they do not shape or determine the inherent value of Christian commitments. Three theologians who will be discussed below, Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and William Placher, would affirm the value of ad hoc apologetics. Yet the use of ad hoc apologetics does not first look for a universally-accepted neutral starting point for uncovering truth (see Placher 1989: 167). Finding a universal starting point is not possible, since the Christian is embedded within a context, community, grammar, and tradition that may only be appropriated by being a practicing participant of that community. The practice of the Christian faith within the faith community, however, can certainly manifest a living apologetic appeal to those outside its community.

2.2 Intratextuality and scripture

Related to this non-foundational and non-apologetic approach to theology is the importance of intratextuality for postliberal theology. Intratextuality refers to the Christian faith community's commitment to the biblical narrative, grammar, tradition, and practices. For both the cognitive-propositional and experiential-expressive approaches to theology, meaning is derived in an extratextual fashion. That is, there is a standard that shapes meaning, externally to, or apart from, the text of the community. In a postliberal intratextual understanding of doctrine, meaning is understood immanently, within the narrative context of the text from which the community was and is shaped. This intratextuality is the mark of doctrinal faithfulness (Pecknold 2005: 30–31). As Lindbeck puts it:

Intratextual theology redescribes reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating Scripture into extrascriptural categories. It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text. (Lindbeck 1984: 118)

2.3 Community centredness

As emphasized above, postliberal theology is not reduced to one's individual faith and personal confession. Christian faith is centred in the community of faith, expressed in its history and connection to the story of Israel (see also [section 2.5](#) below), along with its corporate traditions and liturgical practices. Scripture and theology are intended to function within a community context, rather than being used for individual interpretation where abuses of the text may more likely occur. Theology must always be tied to the church community and its broader connection to God's people throughout biblical and church history.

2.4 'Generous orthodoxy' (ecumenicity)

Extending the community-centredness of postliberal theology also leads to an emphasis on ecumenicity, or, even more broadly, what Hans Frei called a 'generous orthodoxy' (see Frei 1987: 21). With the emphasis upon the particular faith grammar of the Christian community, the generous orthodoxy of postliberal theology is, however, not restricted to the practices of a specific local church community. Instead, the notion of 'community' includes an understanding of the universality of the Christian faith expressed in its various denominational expressions, and in all of God's people throughout history. William Placher makes this observation drawing from John Calvin (2007: 94): our various theological traditions are constantly in conversation with those that have preceded us; our local faith communities must have a sense of rootedness in the broader Christian community throughout history. This feature of 'generous orthodoxy' negates the modernist tendency to seek neutrality and neglect tradition in the process of knowing the Christian faith.

2.5 Focus on Israel

Postliberal theology seeks to maintain the integration of the story of the Christian community with that of Israel. Both are part of the ongoing narrative of God's people in scripture. Lindbeck insists that the story of the early Christians, through the lens of Christ, was embedded in the history of Israel. The stories of Israel were the context by which the church's 'self-understanding' was shaped. Jesus Christ was the 'fulfilment' and 'embodiment of Israel', and, likewise, 'the Church is the body of Christ' (Lindbeck 2002: 149, 150). Although this story was appropriated in divergent ways by the early Christians, it is nonetheless impossible to deny the continuity of Israel and the church from a Christian perspective; they are both part of the same overarching narrative of God's people (2002: 151).

Lindbeck points out that this perspective was at times lost in the history of the church, as some doctrines began to be applied to individuals rather than to the community of believers at large. Additionally, the church developed to be more sociologically Gentile than Jew, so it ceased to be seen as a Jewish sect with a common history. Yet, for

Lindbeck, the story of the church is the continuation of the story of Israel, displaying God's mercy and judgment through time (2002: 152, 157).

Jewish theologian Peter Ochs states: 'postliberal Christian theologians are already among the most active dialogue partners with Jews on matters of faith and belief' (2011: 266). He submits that postliberal theology moves beyond the 'dyadic logics' and divisions of modernity (also those of early Christian exegetes), hence excluding supersessionism. Moreover, it recovers a connection with the Old Testament, with Israel's covenant, and with the Jewish people (Ochs 2011: 17–18). In Ochs' interpretation and engagement with Lindbeck, he offers some implications of postliberal theology with respect to Israel, the church, and supersessionism. According to Ochs, postliberal theology affirms that nonsupersessionism must be a corollary to the Reformation doctrine of *sola scriptura* (scripture alone). This requires that the Gospels are read in view of both the Old and New Testaments as parts of the complete canon of scripture. This reading also implies, for Ochs, that the New Testament is not read with the lens of a replacement theology, where 'Christ replaces Israel, and so on'. Additional prohibitions given by Ochs, from a postliberal perspective, would include not reading biblical narratives without considering their connection to the contexts of Old and New Testaments, nor reading them from a pre-understood hierarchy. A final prohibition, for Ochs, is that one must not read scripture as if it were reduced to providing 'reformational guidelines' (2011: 61–62).

3 Philosophical and sociological background

(Portions of section 3 have been adapted from Michener 2013 with the permission of Bloomsbury/T&T Clark)

3.1 Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951)

The Austrian-born linguistic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein was not committed to Christian faith, but his ideas had profound influence on the sensibilities behind postliberal theology. His early work was influenced by logical positivism, an empirical perspective of language that affirmed a one-to-one correspondence between propositions and the reality to which they refer. However, Wittgenstein's view changed over time as he saw the diversity of how language operates in life. Language for Wittgenstein was used differently in different contexts. Language must be understood pragmatically – that is, how it is used in everyday life (MacDonald 2005: 436; Wittgenstein 2009: 53, section 116). To describe this, Wittgenstein suggested that language operates in various 'language-games' that are expressed in different linguistic activities, including (among others) giving commands, singing, describing events or objects, giving greetings, and making requests (Wittgenstein 2009: 15, section 23). Language-games are also characteristic of the language we use within our various communities and traditions (Goh 2000: 332–333). The meaning of language is then derived from how it is used within particular contexts, and one must

not arbitrarily impose one context's use of language upon another. For instance, when Wittgenstein speaks to cases of religious belief, referring to such matters as 'Judgment Day' or 'Resurrection', one would not express such beliefs using vocabulary of 'opinion' or 'high probability', but rather use words such as 'dogma' and 'faith' (Michener 2013: 20–23; cf. Wittgenstein 1972: 55–57).

Wittgenstein influenced the postliberal theologian George Lindbeck, but whether Lindbeck's appropriation accurately represented Wittgenstein has been contested. For example, theologian Fergus Kerr submits that, for Wittgenstein, the forms of life in which language-games are embedded refer to more basic, small aspects of daily life practices, rather than to the greater complexity of religion in general. Religion, broadly speaking, would have 'innumerable language laced activities', so to suggest that 'any language game functions in isolation from others has no basis in Wittgenstein's work' (Kerr 1997: 31). It is a mistake, according to Kerr, to suggest that a member within a community of faith would be restricted to a particular language game which those outside the community would be exempt from understanding (Goh 2000: 356–357; cf. also Kerr 1997: 28–29).

3.2 Thomas Kuhn (1922–1996)

Philosopher of science, Thomas Kuhn, published a landmark book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962, second edition 1970) that functions as a parallel to Wittgenstein's language-games, with more specific application to scientific discourse. Kuhn argued that scientific investigation is not a neutral endeavour. Instead, in the course of the history of science, criteria for evaluating scientific evidence have gone through 'paradigm shifts' (a term coined by Kuhn) depending on the specific research field. Social factors are at also at work in the production of knowledge, according to Kuhn, and such factors reveal an incommensurability among the scientific criteria applied through the years. Kuhn's work shows the importance of how specific contexts and particular communities shape the vision and outcome of scientific work. For example, a chemist sees a helium atom as a molecule, but for the physicist it is not a molecule since there is no display of molecular spectrum. In this case, both scientists are viewing the same particle, but they are looking at the evidence from their own specific scientific disciplines (Kuhn 1970: 50–51). The data that shapes one's interpretation are evaluated differently because they are framed within the context of a paradigm. It may prove difficult to analyse the rules governing a particular paradigm, but it may nevertheless remain possible to identify the overall research paradigm. Kuhn suggests this may be seen in the concept of 'tacit knowledge' acquired through practice, developed by the Hungarian philosopher of science, Michael Polanyi (Kuhn 1970: 44, note 1). Polanyi will be considered in the following section.

As with Lindbeck's appropriation of Wittgenstein, the way in which Lindbeck appropriates Kuhn's notion of incommensurability and applies it to the incommensurability of doctrine

among various faith communities has also been questioned. Lindbeck masterfully adapts Kuhn's proposal, but the question remains as to what extent different religious beliefs are so vastly different as to be incommensurable, and the extent to which rational discourse may occur between those holding different beliefs (Goh 2000: 519; cf. Lindbeck 1984: 130–132).

3.3 Michael Polanyi (1891–1976)

Michael Polanyi argues that human knowledge stems from our personal commitments and practices (Polanyi 1998: 64–65). Knowledge also may be ineffable, that is, we may indeed have knowledge not know how we know, or we may not know the particulars of what we know. For example, we may know how to ride a bicycle, as Polanyi explains, but this does not mean that we know how we know this (1998: 88). For Polanyi, it is our tacit background beliefs that are the source of our knowledge (1998: 266). This does not preclude following a particular method in scientific investigation, but the methods 'are but the maxims of an art' that are applied in one's 'own original way' to the problem of choice (1998: 311). As Polanyi further explains:

Tacit assent and intellectual passions, the sharing of an idiom and of a cultural heritage, affiliation to a like-minded community: such are the impulses which shape our vision of the nature of things on which we rely for our mastery of things. No intelligence, however critical or original, can operate outside such a fiduciary framework. (Polanyi 1998: 266)

Likewise, only the Christian embedded within their faith can comprehend Christian theology and engage the meaning of scripture (1998: 281).

Lindbeck loosely refers to Polanyi in *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984), and he affirms Polanyi's influence more explicitly in an article several years later. Lindbeck explains that Polanyi's view of tacit knowledge, of knowing 'how to do things', greatly surpasses 'what we are doing' (Lindbeck 1984: 38, 44 note 19, original emphasis). Referring to Polanyi's bicycle riding example mentioned above, Lindbeck submits that the same type of 'know how' knowledge applies to not only the sciences but also to other disciplines of thought. That is, the practicing of the intellectual activities is more significant than understanding the methodology behind them (Lindbeck 1996: 225). Polanyi's perspectives have in part indirectly influenced, or at least anticipated, postliberal theological sensibilities via Thomas Kuhn.

3.4 Alasdair MacIntyre (b. 1929)

The moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre also engaged with Polanyi, even if he did not fully agree with him (Turner 2003: 88; cf. also 89–90). MacIntyre had a clear influence

on the development of postliberal theology. Lindbeck acknowledged that he thinks ‘along the epistemological lines’ of MacIntyre (Lindbeck 1996: 252), and Stanley Hauerwas frequently engages with MacIntyre in Hauerwas’ book, *A Community of Character* (1981).

MacIntyre is critical of grand modernist schemes that advocate absolutist ethics and is also opposed to the converse perspective of ethical emotivism that relegates moral decisions to one’s own preferences. Instead, he argues that ethics must be applied within particular contexts, traditions, and communities, as ethical neutrality is a delusion (Michener 2013: 27; MacIntyre 1988: 350). However, simply because ethics are socially and contextually situated does not imply ethical arbitrariness or lack of rationality. Rationality may not be universally accessible but is nonetheless present as one draws upon past traditional conceptions of morality while translating them into contemporary conditions. Virtues and their practices are embedded in tradition, rituals, and community. Accompanying this emphasis on past traditions, MacIntyre also respects an openness to the possibilities of the future. This is not a dismissal of truth, for MacIntyre, but rather placing the manner of investigation and access to truth within a tradition-community context (Goh 2000: 43; also see MacIntyre 1988: 354–356).

MacIntyre desires to guard continuity between traditions, but when a paradigm shift occurs (cf. Kuhn) the previously-held beliefs become inferior to the new (Vidu 2005: 134; MacIntyre 1988: 356). MacIntyre’s position is contested. Adonis Vidu asks: ‘If MacIntyre requires the winning tradition to narrate the failures of the defeated one, can he still maintain that the two had been incommensurable?’ (Vidu 2005: 135). The philosopher Donald Davidson argues that, if a narrative is translatable, as MacIntyre suggests, then it must also imply commensurability. If this is the case, it becomes problematic for MacIntyre’s desire to maintain the notion of incommensurability along with translatability (Vidu 2005: 135). Regardless of these debates, MacIntyre’s critique of modernism and its failure to find a neutral, tradition-less rationality instead of a tradition-laden rationality is well-known, and is influential on the postliberal theological agenda (Goh 2000: 46–48).

3.5 Clifford Geertz (1926–2006)

The cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz has exerted an influence on the impulses of postliberal theology, especially by way of his ethnographic concept of ‘thick description’, borrowed from philosopher Gilbert Ryle. A ‘thick description’ is a way of characterizing facets of social discourse in culture, but it also applies to religion. Culture and religion are not overarching entities in themselves but consist of various interconnecting ‘conceptual structures’. The goal is not to generalize among all the various structures, but to generalize within the structures in order to provide a ‘thick description’. It is ‘thick’ in the sense that it is only understood within its own complex, intratextual context (Goh 2000: 184–185; Lindbeck 1984: 115).

Religious beliefs not only shape the lives and practices of their adherents (collectively and individually), but religious practices also shape the content of religious beliefs. To have the 'religious perspective' is not a matter of common-sense everyday reality, for Geertz. It also does not entail putting religion through the demands of scientific empirical research and analysis. Neither is the religious perspective reduced to an aesthetic perspective that focuses on how things appear. Instead, the religious perspective focuses on that which is ultimately real through its symbolic actions (Geertz 1973: 112). Religious convictions and beliefs come via informal, symbolic, interconnected, and ritualistic practices, but they are not subject to an overarching formal symbolic system; they are 'intratextual' (Goh 2000: 185). Although Wittgenstein is seldom quoted by Geertz, there are some clear connections here with Geertz's emphasis on cultural practices and Wittgenstein's language-games as a 'set of practices'.

3.6 Peter Berger (1929–2017) and Thomas Luckmann (1927–2016)

Sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann authored the book *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967). The title speaks for itself: how one understands reality is socially constructed. This does not mean that the physical world around us does not exist, but that the way that one connects knowledge to one's understanding of reality may differ among cultures. How a Buddhist monk in Cambodia understands reality will differ from a businessperson in Brussels; hence, their perspective of what is deemed as knowledge will also differ. As Berger and Luckmann put it: 'the sociology of knowledge must concern itself with whatever passes for "knowledge" in a society, regardless of the ultimate validity or invalidity (by whatever criteria) of such "knowledge"' (Berger and Luckmann 1967: 3). It is up to the sociologist to analyse and describe the social construction of everyday reality within the context of a particular culture and community. This theme is present in all the thinkers discussed thus far. What is considered knowledge is never without bias but is always mediated through particular contexts and daily life practices. Further, Berger and Luckmann also refer to 'relevance structures' – where knowledge is shared depending on one's context. The automotive mechanic will not be aware of another person's plumbing problems, and the plumber will not know about the faulty exhaust of another person's automobile. Knowledge is 'socially distributed' according to need and context (Berger and Luckmann 1967: 45–46).

The influence of Berger and Luckmann's work on postliberal theology is apparent. Although their work is only seldom cited by postliberal theologians, their impact is certainly recognized (see e.g. Lindbeck 2002: 92) and identifiable in relationship to the emphasis of the authors discussed above. One's understanding of reality and knowledge occurs within an embodied pattern of community, religious or otherwise.

4 Theological background and proponents

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The following authors do not represent an exhaustive inventory of theologians associated with postliberal theology. However, those mentioned represent its formative background (Barth, Holmer) and some of its most influential proponents (Frei, Lindbeck, Kelsey, Hauerwas, Hunsinger, Placher, Marshall, Tanner). This is not to say that each of these thinkers would identify themselves as a 'postliberal theologian', but they all manifest key sensibilities of postliberal theology.

4.1 Karl Barth (1886–1968)

It is perhaps Karl Barth who has had the most significant influence on postliberal theological perspectives. Although it may be an anachronism, Barth was indeed *post-liberal* in the sense that he did not allow modern liberalism to set the standards to which theology must conform. Barth denounced his professors (such as Wilhelm Herrmann and Adolf von Harnack) who were steeped in natural theology and emphasized the power of human reason. Barth witnessed the moral collapse of such perspectives that led to his mentors supporting German National Socialism. Instead, for Barth, God is 'Wholly Other' and beyond human capability to know without God's direct intervention. Echoing the words of Søren Kierkegaard, Barth affirmed that there is an 'infinite qualitative distinction' between God and man (Barth 1968: 10, 202, 276, 355).

Barth wrote that Christian faith must not be subject to modernist expectations, nor to any other external influences; it is only subject to its own internal, contextualized, self-attestation of reality. Further, for Barth, God must not be reduced to an object to be known. Knowledge by faith is not limited to intellectual cognition. Only God can convey Godself to human beings by God's grace in Jesus Christ (Barth 2004: 15).

Postliberal theology echoes Barth's sentiments, not allowing any external philosophical assumptions to set the standards of justification for Christian claims. The Christian narrative itself sets its own standards and has its own internal coherence. The postliberal theologian Hans Frei was, as will be seen, significantly impacted by Barth. Commenting on Barth, Frei said that the 'communal Christian language' that was shaped by 'the Bible, tradition and constant usage in worship, practice, instruction and controversy' had its own integrity and 'was irreducible'. Along with this self-attesting, descriptive reality of the Bible, Frei notes that Barth had to 'recreate a universe of discourse' and show the reader how to function in this discourse (Frei 1992: 158–159).

4.2 Paul Holmer (1916–2004)

Another theological influence on postliberal theology (and arguably a postliberal theologian in his own right) was Yale theologian Paul Holmer. Although he may be less well-known, his book *The Grammar of Faith* (1978) shows how he critically appropriated the language-game philosophy of Wittgenstein within theology. Holmer claims that theology is ‘an interpretation’ and the ‘game which we all must play if we are to refer our lives to God’ (Holmer 1978: 9). He also makes the larger point that any ‘facts’ are always claimed within a particular context (1978: 102), and that there are different types of knowing for different disciplines (1978: 187). Knowledge of God is no exception; it is a ‘context determined’ perspective of ‘knowing’ (1978: 186). Concepts such as knowledge and objectivity are never neutral, they are always embedded in a particular context (1978: 190).

For Holmer, some facts are historical in nature, others may be theological. Although both are important, theological facts are not always dependent on historical facts. When it comes to following God, for example, one only knows God by ‘fearing and loving’ God, which is a theological understanding, a ‘grammar of faith’ (1978: 24–25). As grammar provides guidelines of using a language that become a habitual embedded practice, so theology also has its own grammar that shapes its practices.

George Lindbeck was influenced by Holmer’s appropriation of Wittgenstein (Lindbeck 1984: 28, note 28). However, Holmer’s notion of the ‘grammar’ of theology was more directly connected to the lived practice of Christian faith, whereas in Lindbeck’s view ‘grammar’ was that which ‘governs’ theology (Kallenberg 2016: 67).

A key motivation in postliberal theology is to challenge the modernist assumption of coming to knowledge from a neutral standpoint based on reason and/or science. Holmer, drawing upon Wittgenstein, is in line with this challenge by promoting knowledge of God within the context of the church community.

4.3 Hans Frei (1922–1988)

Yale theologian Hans Frei was a pivotal, seminal figure in postliberal theology. He was born to secular Jewish parents in Germany, educated at a Quaker school in England, and eventually moved with his family to the United States in 1938. Frei’s influential book, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974), argued that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries made drastic mistakes in the reading of the Bible. Frei called this ‘a great reversal’ (Frei 1974: 130). Prior to this, the Bible’s narrative itself shaped reality, but, in the Enlightenment, the perceived reality of science and rationality began to shape the interpretation of the Bible. Likewise, rather than beginning with the Bible and its world, modern theology sought to begin its work with the predicaments of human existence

and experience. Greatly influenced by Barth, Frei advocated for a theology that was 'unapologetic' (Springs 2010: 8; cf. also 9–19). For Frei, faith had become subject to culture, with culture and modern philosophical concerns shaping the context for interpretation. As a result, 'the narrative feature of the biblical stories' (Frei 1974: 136; cf. also 135) were not accounted for in a serious manner (Frei 1974: 135–136; Goh 2000: 136–137). Frei intended instead to recover early Christian and Jewish approaches to reading scripture within the practices of these early communities (Springs 2010: 4).

It was important for Frei that the Bible's 'history-like' narrative guide its readers, rather than succumbing to the late-Enlightenment thirst for historical propositions that demand evidence for their factuality (Higton 2006: 222). Referring to this, Mike Higton writes: 'The literary narratives had been eclipsed by their factual referents' (2006: 222). On one hand, the notion of factuality present in this critical endeavour obscured the literary nature of the biblical text. On the other hand, some emphasized the literary nature of the text so much as to neglect its history-like narrative. Frei is not merely a 'story' theologian who wants to look at the entire Bible through the lens of story and symbol, nor is he attempting to frame an overarching, grand narrative of the Bible (Higton 2006: 223, 233–234).

Frei submits that the passion and resurrection accounts in the Gospels undo this tendency to eclipse the narrative of the Bible. When we read these accounts, we are compelled to believe that Jesus cannot be understood apart from the event of his resurrection, as it is intrinsic to Jesus' identity. In saying this, Frei is not reducing the resurrection account to a literalistic historicism. He agrees to the historical account of the resurrection without being compelled to harmonize its different accounts or provide the literal, temporal 'facts' of the event (Higton 2006: 225–226).

An ecclesiological or sociological shift in Frei's thinking in his later years has been noted by some theologians. For instance, Michael Higton observes that in the 1970s and 1980s Frei focused on the continuity of the application or practice of the Gospels in Christian community, which had been previously underplayed (Higton 2006: 229–230; cf. Springs 2010: 43). Jason Springs, however, emphasizes that Frei's maturing historical and cultural insights are an expansion and not a rejection of his earlier claims (Springs 2010: 39, 52), and that they more explicitly manifest his understanding of the church 'as socially embodied and historically extended' (Springs 2010: 52).

Frei coined the term 'generous orthodoxy'. For him, this meant a way of reconciling perspectives between Christian liberals and conservative evangelicals (Fulford 2020: 101–102). For Frei, we neglect to appreciate the 'biblical stories in their own right' when we confuse 'meaning and reference on one hand' and 'religious-apologetical interests on the other' (Frei 1974: 220). This confusion is what distorts our understanding of the biblical narratives. Further, when the Bible is allowed to speak from its own context and

grammar of faith, its doctrines always follow from the practice of faith within the community of faith that embody the Gospel narratives. The Bible is a story that we inhabit, rather than a doctrinal textbook.

4.4 George Lindbeck (1923–2018)

Frei's colleague at Yale, George Lindbeck, wrote a brief but extremely significant book for understanding postliberal theology: *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (1984). Although Lindbeck reserves the term 'postliberal' for the final chapter, postliberal theological sensibilities run throughout the text. Lindbeck, a committed Lutheran, incorporates the intratextuality of Frei while also drawing upon the language games of Wittgenstein, the cultural anthropological insights of Geertz, and the Reformed confessional position of Barth.

Lindbeck was deeply influenced by his background as the son of missionary parents in China. He noticed the deeply Christian-like manners of some Confucian friends of his parents, which stimulated his later thinking about basic convictions that are relevant to a cultural-linguistic view of religion that he advocates in *The Nature of Doctrine*. He observed that our community context profoundly influences our being. He also suggested that what it means to be human is quite similar across cultures, yet the particularity of cultures restricts the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication. For Lindbeck, it is the 'book sustained' communities – those that have their own distinctive expressions of beliefs and practices – that can maintain strength in the face of opposition.

Lindbeck's doctrinal concerns began as ecumenical concerns, while maintaining his commitment to Lutheranism. As he once said: 'if you are going to be really ecumenical, you are going to have to know your own tradition and love it to the depths' (Wright 2012: 118; cf. Brown 2022: 9). Lindbeck served as a delegate to the Lutheran World Federation at the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II). These dialogues prompted Lindbeck to think of a different approach to Christian doctrine that was more conciliatory, beyond the conservative/liberal divisions. He observed three general approaches as to how doctrine functions in religion. The first is the 'cognitive-propositional' approach, which emphasizes facts, information, theological propositions, and truth claims, as they pertain to (what is understood to be) the objective reality about one's faith. The second perspective Lindbeck observes is the 'experiential-expressive' approach. In this case, doctrines are not seen as propositions or statements of fact but as subjective, existential, religious symbols. Both approaches fail for Lindbeck, however, as they both put too much credence in modernist assumptions.

The third perspective is typical of Roman Catholic theologians such as Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan (Lindbeck 1984: 24). This perspective is a blend of both the cognitive-propositional and experience-expressive approaches. Both propositions and experiential

symbols are highly significant for Christian faith. Unfortunately, in Lindbeck's view, this perspective would be difficult to apply in efforts of ecumenical reconciliation, for instance, between Roman Catholics and Protestants.

Instead, Lindbeck proposes a 'cultural-linguistic' approach to theology that allows for propositions of faith, emotions, and experiences, and provides the means for a grammar by which that faith is embedded and practiced. The Christian faith is not reduced to facts or statements about one's beliefs but is also about living within a story of the Bible that is wrapped in a language and grammar that shapes an understanding of reality. Lindbeck attempts to describe how such practices of language operate within a Christian faith community context, but he does not try to provide a rational defence or justification of Christian doctrine. It is not that propositions, facts, or experience and symbols are absent, but the main priority of Christian doctrine is about describing the grammar and practices of the faith community within its own cultural and narrative context.

Lindbeck provides an example that helps to clarify this point. When a Christian asserts 'Jesus is Lord' it is not simply an assertion to be scrutinised but an expression of commitment to a community that commonly hold the same conviction. Further, the expression is not reduced to an experiential symbol. It is symbolic of the confession of the community of the one making the claim, but it is also a statement about one's belief. It is making a proposition *and* performing an action of commitment at the same time (Lindbeck 1984: 66).

There are three 'regulative principles' (Lindbeck 1984: 94) behind the ancient creeds that Lindbeck mentions to further demonstrate his postliberal perspective. These are monotheism, the historical Jesus, and the centrality and absolute significance of Jesus Christ as the pointer to God. There are other principles at play as well, but these three have been essential for the Christian faith throughout history as they have been firmly ingrained in the habits of speech and practices of Christians.

In addition to the ancient creeds and their essential doctrinal principles, Lindbeck also insists that Christian ecclesiology cannot be detached from the narrative of the history of Israel. Both Christians and Jews are God's elect people, and Lindbeck contends that 'rethinking their relation is fundamental to ecumenism' (Lindbeck 2002: 200; see [section 2.5](#)).

4.5 David Kelsey (b. 1932)

Another postliberal theologian and colleague of Frei and Lindbeck is David Kelsey. Where Frei emphasizes the history-like narrative of the Bible, without reducing it to a series of historical facts, and Lindbeck stresses the grammar of faith for the Christian community, Kelsey emphasizes the relevance of truth criteria pertaining to various disciplines of

thought. The criteria of truth relevant for the biologist will differ from that of the historian. Further, the criteria relevant for a particular discipline will be internally monitored from within the discipline itself. Kelsey developed his views in an influential book, *The Uses of Scripture in Modern Theology* (1975), later published as *Proving Doctrine* (1999), using the previous title as the new subtitle. Paul J. DeHart points out that Kelsey's book had a great influence on the developing postliberal sensibilities of Frei and Lindbeck (DeHart 2006: 27–28).

Kelsey claimed that there are three aspects that render scripture 'Christian' in the eyes of the church: (1) it operates in the life of the church in particular ways that demonstrate its implied authority; (2) it is used as the text that guides people to salvation and changed lives; and (3) it is used as an identity-forming narrative within the church community (Kelsey 1999: 90–91). Hence, when scripture is deemed as authoritative, it is assumed that a common, agreed set of practices or rules derived from scripture will regulate the way theology operates within the church community. There is an ongoing dialectic between the concepts of scripture and the church, for Kelsey. Church practices make the church, and the church draws from scripture for the ongoing governance of those practices with the leading of God's Holy Spirit (1999: 91–93; see also [The Spirit in the Christian Bible](#)).

4.6 Stanley Hauerwas (b. 1940)

Along with David Kelsey, another theologian who is highly significant for the community aspects of postliberal theology is Stanley Hauerwas. Hauerwas emphasized the church, and its members therein, as the embodied, community of Christ now and throughout history. Hauerwas was profoundly influenced by the pacifist ethics of John Howard Yoder, the virtue ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre (see Wells 1998: 31–35, 43–44), and Lindbeck's pragmatic cultural-linguistic approach to theology.

Hauerwas is characteristically postliberal in his disdain for both biblical fundamentalism and theological liberalism, both of which overly emphasize Enlightenment rationality and neutral objectivity apart from a community-based ethic. Reading the Bible is not about reading it for oneself or creating one's own story from its narrative. Instead, the Bible must always be interpreted within, not without, the context of community of faith in consideration of both its history and practices.

Jesus himself *is* the church's social ethic, for Hauerwas. The story of Jesus in the Gospels, the Jesus who incarnated and atoned for our sins, must shape and guide Christian disciples. In turn, the story of Jesus must be learned and manifested to the world. In manifesting the story of Jesus, Christians are the kingdom of God and are, like Jesus, a social ethic. With this said, Hauerwas does not describe himself as a 'narrative theologian', per se, as he does not wish to align himself with a particular theological perspective or theory that leans toward apologetic purposes in modern thought (Michener 2013: 73–77).

4.7 Other voices: George Hunsinger, William Placher, Bruce Marshall, Kathryn Tanner

In addition to the key figures noted above, there are other theologians that may be recognized as having postliberal theological sensibilities. This section will mention four: George Hunsinger, William Placher, Bruce Marshall, and Kathryn Tanner.

4.7.1 George Hunsinger (b. 1945)

George Hunsinger once referred to his 'own work' as 'a sympathetic reworking of the Lindbeck typology to direct it more plausibly along postliberal lines'. Hunsinger does his 'reworking' primarily through the lens of Barth, to show the alignment of Barth with Lindbeck's postliberal theology (Hunsinger 2003: 46). Hunsinger sees Frei's notion of intratextuality 'as more directly "postliberal"', whereas Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic perspective is more neo-liberal than postliberal (Hunsinger 2003: 44). Lindbeck's perspective is neoliberal, for Hunsinger, because it remains embedded in the 'liberal paradigm'; it simply replaces expressivism (theology derived from common experiences) with pragmatism, while remaining resistant to propositionalism (theology derived from truth claims). To correct this, Hunsinger suggests making a correlation between Barth and Lindbeck to reach a critical realist notion of truth that would offer a 'richer' version of postliberal theology (2003: 44–45). Critical realism, using Hunsinger's typology, navigates between an unambiguous literalism and ambiguous expressivism by taking an analogical approach. Barth's analogical, dialectical theology acknowledges 'similarity and dissimilarity between word and object, text and referent, whether the textual referent is God or historical events or some combination of the two' (2003: 47). Analogical references are not restricted to the univocal or equivocal, but they are nonetheless propositional, a perspective that would not be emphasized in Lindbeck's pragmatic approach. Hunsinger gives an example via Irenaeus: 'God is light, but he is unlike any light that we know' (*Against Heresies* II.13.4). This does not mean that God is literally fully accessible to human beings, but neither does it require that humans deny God's accessibility for complete transcendence (2003: 47; see also Michener 2013: 87–88).

4.7.2 William Placher (1948–2008)

William Placher once wrote: 'Christian theologians ought to avoid letting philosophers or anyone else set their agendas or the rules for their activities [...] postliberal theologians have brought this point into clear theological focus' (1989: 165). This statement reflects how Placher was influenced by Frei's challenge to begin with the narrative of the Bible rather than the historical, cultural demands of modernity. Frei emphasized that many 'history like' (even if not 'historical') biblical narratives help mould 'Christian belief' (Frei 1974: 10). Placher balances this, however, by pointing out that the Gospels, for example, are written in various genres other than merely historical narrative. The truth rendered in

one of Jesus' parables is different than the truth of the historical account of an event. Truth itself is universal, for Placher, but the way in which a particular claim to truth is supported always depends on its context and use in tradition. However, like Frei and Lindbeck, Placher does not put apologetic concerns at the forefront of postliberal theology, since faith commitment is defined within the Christian community rather than from external sources of (assumed) authority (see Placher 1989: 167).

In Placher's *The Triune God*, he articulates an 'epistemology of the Spirit', where knowledge is not reduced to cognition but involves the Holy Spirit's work in the Christian by living a transformative personal faith in community. Placher seeks to rebut the divisions between the intellect and the affections that were characteristic of theologians such as Augustine, Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards (see Placher 2007: 81, 92, 93, 95–99, 102–103).

Drawing from Moltmann, Placher also suggests that, like the Trinity, a postliberal theological perspective of community displays unity with a respect for difference, without one or the other in any way discounted. Further, Placher emphasizes that, as living beings, humans are community beings; we cannot be reduced merely to beings that think apart from our affections. Further, Placher's postliberal theology is a conversation between the inside world of the faith community and those outside the faith community (see Nelson 2005: 276). However, to engage in this conversation, one's Christian beliefs are not suspended for the sake of reaching theological (or otherwise) neutrality. It is essential to maintain faith convictions in dialogue and understanding, so that any dialogue with another cannot be separated from one's context and culture.

4.7.3 Bruce Marshall (b. 1955)

In *Trinity and Truth*, Bruce Marshall proposes a trinitarian perspective on truth that stems from the influence of Frei and Lindbeck, along with Aquinas and the analytic philosopher Donald Davidson. Christian beliefs and practices are epistemically grounded within Christian beliefs and practices, rather than in perspectives of truth that are foreign to Christian faith. Truth, for Christians, is not based upon an external foundation from which it seeks justification. Instead, justification of Christian beliefs is done within the specific Christian community context. This is not a simple fideism for Marshall, as he does not think all beliefs are justified by some overarching standard. Instead, he contends that each of our beliefs require discernment as to whether reasons must be provided for them. Marshall submits that it is the triune God working through the Spirit which gives conviction of truth and belief to the Christian community (Marshall 2002: 141–145).

4.7.4 Kathryn Tanner (b. 1957)

Unlike Lindbeck, Kathryn Tanner does not exclusively draw from Wittgenstein to articulate a cognitive-linguistic approach to theology. Instead, Tanner focuses on culture within its

various contexts. In her book *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, Tanner questions the presupposed vantage point of neutrality that is often associated with cultural analysis, as seen in modern approaches to anthropology. Culture is not fixed, but is an ongoing production. Christian theology is also an ongoing development within a particular culture with distinctive regular practices. Tanner is more reluctant to emphasize the rules of the grammar of faith as the unifying factor in Christian community. She strongly values diversity among Christians, but realizes that with diversity comes conflict. Recognizing the existence of conflict, rather than ignoring it, is part of discipleship (Tanner 1997: 173–174), as one learns from – and is corrected by – others. Commitment to unity in the community of faith is tied to the common quest to seek shared faith practices, rather than to the identification of, or agreement with, specific practices themselves. Additionally, Tanner does not advocate for the exclusive truth of Christianity over other religions. Christian discipleship is manifested not by the exclusive claims of Christianity but by following Christ in discussion with those who differ (see Dorrien 2001: 28).

5 Critical appropriations of postliberal theology

The following four theologians are a representative, but not comprehensive, sample of those who have in some manner critically appropriated or developed aspects of postliberal theology from four different emphases.

5.1 Kevin J. Vanhoozer: dramatic, canonical-linguistic theology

(Significant portions of section 5.1 have been adapted from Michener 2013 with the permission of Bloomsbury/T&T Clark)

The theo-dramatic, ‘canonical-linguistic’ theology of Kevin Vanhoozer seeks to guard Lindbeck’s emphasis on faith practice while also stressing the importance of the actual text of scripture. Rather than stressing community context and practice, Vanhoozer makes the performance of the propositions in the speech-acts of scripture by the church community of primary importance (see Vanhoozer 2005: xiii, 17, 171). Propositions, for Vanhoozer, (drawing upon speech-act theory) are not simply reduced to mere statements of fact, but perform a variety of functions that include commands, promises, sarcasm, etc. Vanhoozer agrees with Lindbeck’s critique of propositionalism as it pertains to the way that propositions may distort a narrative reading of the Bible. However, for Vanhoozer, Lindbeck fails to see the expansiveness of the use of language in propositions.

Furthermore, Vanhoozer suggests, by way of critique, that Lindbeck’s postliberal theology emphasizes theological grammar over the actual narrative of Christ. That is, the manner in which the church uses the narrative of the resurrection events in the Gospels is apparently more doctrinally significant for Lindbeck than the actual narrative of the resurrection itself

(see Vanhoozer 2005: 172). Instead, Vanhoozer insists that God must be seen as the 'divine playwright' of scripture, using various styles of communication (speech-acts), via the dramatic participation of human beings (see Vanhoozer 2005: 213). This raises the question as to one's evaluation of faithfulness to the script in the performance of the drama. Rather than only considering intratextuality in this assessment, Vanhoozer maintains that the intent and discourse of the author is essential, with an understanding of God as the ultimate author of scripture who guides human beings in their interpretation by the Holy Spirit.

5.2 James K. A. Smith: Christian pragmatic relativism

James K. A. Smith suggests that his book, *Who's Afraid of Relativism* (2014), may be read as a 'prequel' or 'theoretical back story' to Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*. Smith's proposal for Christian pragmatism is not reduced to utilitarianism and is not advocating for the arbitrariness of doctrine. Rather, he is emphasizing that the meaning and knowledge of Christian doctrine is relative to the practice of a particular Christian community (Smith 2014: 152, 167, 169). Smith claims that a postliberal Christian relativism provides an orientation that is more appreciative of who we are as finite human beings in creation, which modernity often neglects. This calls Christians away from an individualistic epistemology towards a community, church-centred, church-practiced way of knowing. For Smith, this does not require that all universal claims are suspended, but it does negate the often-supposed neutrality of universal claims that ignore the contingency of the practicing community of faith (2014: 170, 172–173).

Smith suggests that a Christian postliberal pragmatic approach is akin to the Reformed epistemology of Alvin Plantinga. Christian faith is not something to prove, but is something which, in ad hoc fashion, may be shown to have warrant in the face of objections. When warrant is displayed and the barriers are down, those once opposed may seriously consider the opportunity to embrace the Christian faith and its specific culture as the most persuasive sense-making narrative for life. When Smith applies this way of thinking to Christian evangelism, he submits that this is less about convincing others about the truth of Christianity and more about inviting people into way of life within a practicing community of faith that has an eternal purpose (2014: 174–176; see also Michener 2013: 135–137).

5.3 John Milbank: radical orthodoxy

Although postliberal theology is most often associated with developments of thought stemming from Frei, Lindbeck, and others noted above, its sensibilities may be expanded to include the theological perspective known as radical orthodoxy (see Smith 2014: 153). Radical orthodoxy is expressed as radical in its commitment to the roots (from Latin *radix*, 'root') of patristic orthodoxy of the Christian faith that diminished in the wake of the late Middle Ages. It is also radical in its criticism of modernity. Like Barth, radical orthodoxy

refuses to succumb to a modernist notion of faith mediated through the hubris of human structures of knowledge. At the same time, radical orthodoxy finds distance from Barth's captivity to the dualism of reason and revelation (Milbank, Pickstock and Ward 1999: 2). The Platonic notion of 'participation' is central to radical orthodoxy, as it appropriates this concept with a robustly Christian framework for understanding all of reality. Every domain of thought, for radical theology, must be theologically shaped: no aspect of creation is independent of God (1999: 3).

Milbank's radical orthodoxy is postliberal in a primary sense, in its embrace of intratextuality. Christian knowledge is not validated via external domains of thought, but within the context of the community of the church (Michener 2013: 94). Milbank refers to Alasdair MacIntyre when he claims that, in some instances, 'signifying terms' of one cultural perspective may not be translatable to those of another culture 'without betrayal and distortion'. The knowledge of an 'outsider' simply cannot be deemed equivalent to that of the 'insider' (Milbank 1993: 340–341; see also Marshall 2002: 16, note 22). A neutral, unambiguous standard of meaning for all does not exist (Milbank 1993: 342).

Peter Ochs understands Milbank's postliberal theology as characteristically postliberal in its pragmatic realism. However, Ochs is critical of what he perceives to be Milbank's foundationalist, supersessionist, and triumphalist leanings which are clearly not postliberal (Ochs 2011: 225–226). Ochs notes that, for Milbank, only Christ can ultimately redeem humankind and navigate away from the 'futile efforts' of the Jewish tradition 'to repair its source' (Ochs 2011: 233–234). Ochs' Jewish postliberal theology suggests an alternative in line with rabbinic tradition: reparations with God are not about eschatological finality, but about fulfilment 'within the limits of a given historical moment' (2011: 239). The assertion of 'Christ alone' to repair Old Testament contradictions does not imply supersessionism for Ochs, but the fact that Milbank presents his view as 'self-legitimizing' and 'true for any reader' is what makes it supersessionist, non-pragmatic, and, in this case, non-postliberal (2011: 245).

5.4 David Burrell: Roman Catholic postliberal theology

David Burrell (among other Roman Catholic theologians such as Robert Barron, James Buckley, and J. A. DiNoia) may not be readily associated with postliberal theology. However, his academic connections with both Lindbeck and Hauerwas display common postliberal sensibilities and common interests in the reappropriation of Thomas Aquinas (Wright 2012: 6–7). Burrell also recognized Frei as instructive for seeing the scriptures as the framework for the world in which one lives, with a dialectic between reason and faith (Burrell 2012: 91).

For Burrell, the Roman Catholic *ressourcement* renewal movement of the twentieth century, along with Vatican II, helped Catholic theological education recover the historical

continuity of Christian theology while also acknowledging that there are different 'modalities' expressed through the tradition. Burrell submits that one cannot be a Christian without first understanding oneself as a Jew (2012: 89). As Burrell put it: 'you could not be a part of the Jesus movement unless you understood that the Scriptures meant the Hebrew Scriptures' (2012: 89).

Where Lindbeck sought to cross the borders of the Reformation, and Hauerwas the borders of the 'contemporary liberal nation-state', Burrell moved to navigate borders 'between the church, synagogue, and mosque' (2012: 136). Burrell's work on Aquinas and the doctrine of creation points to Aquinas' engagement with Muslim and Jewish scholars (2012: 141–142). However, with Aquinas' example of interfaith engagement, there is an understood assumption that this dialogue takes place within the context of the 'communion of saints' through history (2012: 149). Interfaith friendships and ecumenical dialogue are crucial for Burrell's postliberal approach. With interfaith friendships come opportunities for others to 'give witness of their faith' which prompts humility in the receiver of this witness. As humility takes root, after listening to the other, the opportunity is provided to give witness to one's own faith. Burrell is careful to say that this engagement across faith communities (whether for example with Jews or Muslims) is not reduced to relativism, but it does indeed relativize one's own understanding of faith and should lead Christians to take an other-centred 'welcoming posture' (2012: 94–95).

6 Implications and applications of postliberal theology for the church today

In view of the above examples of critical appropriation of postliberal theology, there are a range of potential implications and/or applications of postliberal theology for the contemporary church. The following section offers three initial points for consideration.

6.1 Affections and community practices

Postliberal theology provides a sensibility that attempts to overcome a modernist divide between propositional and emotive tendencies of Christian faith and doctrine. Words and propositions are important in the 'grammar' of faith as they are practiced in faith communities, but, as James K. A. Smith insists, human beings must not be understood merely as creatures of cognition. In fact, for Smith, human beings are primarily affective beings with emotions and imaginations. These affections, emotions, and creative tendencies are shaped from within the context of communities and regular community practices. Smith's insights on Christian pragmatic relativism, along with the significance and value of the role of affections, both complement and supplement postliberal theology by integrating the community-shaped aspect of doctrine in the liturgical practices of the church, along with the affective nature of human beings (see Smith 2009: 24–25, 34).

William Cavanaugh points out that a renewed postliberal ecclesiological vision breaks down the artificial boundaries between religion and reason (Cavanaugh 2011: 227). Both Smith and Cavanaugh remind Christians that the church is not merely about intellectual and propositional engagement with doctrine, but also about emotional, reflective, faithful practices in community.

6.2 Interpretation in community

Along with the postliberal focus on community practices, there is also an implicit call to community interpretation. Rather than interpretation of the Bible and theology stemming primarily from the individual's personal study, a postliberal vision begins from the community first, then the individual. Community interpretation is also about returning to the rootedness of interpretation in the historical community of faith through Christian history, which would include its confessions and traditions. Further, by implication, it encourages interpretation in dialogue with various nationalities, cultures, denominations, and theological backgrounds. By focusing on the broader church community (locally and historically) it provides a safeguard against abusive, self-serving, or individualistic interpretations and applications.

6.3 Theological hospitality

As implied above, when interpretation is done in community and among communities of faith it provides occasions to practice the discipline of humility, which in turn leads to theological hospitality that affords deep and mutually respectful dialogue (see Buschart 2006: 273, 275). Due to its focus on the particularity of community and community practices, postliberal theology may be wrongly accused of insularity. Yet, as noted previously, its ecumenical impulses are strong. However, embracing a robust ecumenicity does not imply lack of commitment to a specific confessional tradition. In fact, hospitality to those who are different requires a faith-identity or tradition from which hospitality may be extended. A particular faith-community context allows the space from which Christian charity may be manifested to those outside one's own tradition. Moreover, when such hospitable space is given from within a tradition, those from different traditions are then able to clearly recognize distinct differences and hence have the opportunity engage and learn from other traditions more profoundly.

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