I. The Fruits of Postliberalism

Peter Ochs’ *Another Reformation* is a striking, provocative assessment of the significance of contemporary postliberal theology. Examining the work of several influential American and British theologians, Ochs argues persuasively for a correlation between postliberal hermeneutics and non-supersessionist theology. Through their emphasis on scriptural interpretation as the basis for theological inquiry, postliberals continue the work of the Protestant Reformation; however, as they retrieve a wider scope of interpretive practices from within the Christian tradition, they renew the reformation in ways that can repair many of the divisions and sufferings that it produced—not least the supersessionism that has often afflicted both Lutheran and Reformed theology.

How does a renewal of *sola scriptura* lead away from supersessionism? For Ochs, the primary reason for this is that postliberal scriptural interpretation is a form of reparative reasoning: a practice of responsive, experimental inquiry that attends to the forms of suffering in the world. Moreover, it seeks to participate in God’s reparative work within the world, rather than taking repair to be something that could be achieved or completed solely through human reason and effort. It thereby offers a reparative alternative to materialist or secular forms of pragmatic repair. Reasoning through the re-reading of scripture instills a humility on several levels: a focus on reasoning with regard to specific contexts, an openness to alternative interpretations and practices as scripturally (and theologically) warranted, and a recognition that theological reflection and argument take place as conversations between human reasoners. The last point is significant for understanding the shape of this book, which embodies this claim by focusing on the work of Ochs’ closest Christian interlocutors. As embodied in their practice, postliberalism strives toward an expansive unity within Christianity, acknowledging the validity of diverse modes of religious practice and interpretation.

Two points highlight how postliberal theology makes space for plurality within the space of argument. First, drawing most directly on Lindbeck, Ochs argues that doctrines should be understood as negative rules: they rule out what is beyond the bounds of Christian belief or practice, but thereby create space within which argument, disagreement, and improvisation can take place. Second, postliberals emphasize that the gospels (and other New Testament texts as well) should be understood as *readings of the Jewish scriptures*: readings which generate new interpretations, to be sure, but which do so within the bounds of the covenant and as affirmations of its continued centrality. Both of these enhance Christian unity, while also establishing connections between Christian discipleship and the Jewish covenant. Such a differential unity

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1 My thanks to Rocky Gangle for conversations that were very helpful in clarifying central aspects of Peirce’s pragmatic and reparative modes of reasoning.
allows the church to see itself and Judaism (as well as other forms of religious and ethical practice) as varied movements of the one God, rejecting the dyadic logic that leads toward supersessionism. It is at these levels—in its renewal of Christian hermeneutics and its deepening of the pursuit of unity—that postliberalism can be “judged by its fruits,” the mode of evaluation central to Peirce’s pragmatic ethos.

The argument of the book is powerful and deeply significant, casting new light on the work of authors whom postliberals may think they know well. It raises numerous claims and contributes more insights than I can discuss here. This review focuses on the following issues that the book raises: the relationship between supersessionism and schism; Ochs’ readings of Hauerwas and Yoder as non-supersessionist and “non-non-supersessionist”; and the relationship between the “Anglican” and “American” schools of postliberalism. I raise these issues in the hope that they will help advance conversation about this book, contributing to its emphasis on arguing for the sake of unity.

II. Supersessionism and Schism

One of the most intriguing elements of Ochs’ engagement with postliberal theology is his interpretation of the significance of supersessionism. Ochs counters the idea that supersessionism is principally an ethical problem—as a question of Christian attitudes toward Judaism, or as a constellation of Christian beliefs that should be discarded out of guilt over the Shoah—on several notable levels. The ethical problems of supersessionism emerge out of the deeper conceptual and hermeneutical problems within its theological viewpoint. To put it briefly: supersessionism’s ethical problems are symptoms of the deep logic of schism, a logic that destroys the very possibility of unity to which its universalizing claims aspire.

In its quasi-Cartesian quest for clarity and distinctness, the logic of schism refuses to accept vagueness as an aspect of transcendence—and perhaps, just as importantly, of revelation. For Ochs, vagueness provokes both musement and wonder, creating a sense of humility. For example, God speaks to a Christian community in this way, via the figural reading of the Gospels and through Paul’s hermeneutics. At the same time, however, God may speak (or may have spoken) to other (local) churches in different ways, or to non-Christian communities in different voices and via different interpretive practices. Vagueness offers a way to conceive of the truth of particular revelations without generalizing them into universal (and thus hegemonic) claims. Thus, one might say that vagueness serves as a Peircean index for God’s freedom, and thereby for a nonrelativistic pluralism.²

What Ochs argues persuasively is that supersessionism (or, in the case of Yoder, non-non-supersessionism) emerges when there is a refusal within a theological project to accept vagueness and its ensuing plurality. Effectively, the dyadic logic of schism is that you are with us or against us: difference is coded as contradiction and therefore as enmity. What makes this argument especially significant is how, while generally seeing postliberalism as acknowledging

² As will be painfully obvious to readers of this review, I am not now and have never been a Peircean semiologist. My references to Peirce here are made with the goal of articulating Ochs’ logic as fully as I can, and I apologize in advance for the misconstruals and manglings of his thought and terminology.
vagueness as a mark of transcendence, Ochs locates moments within postliberal thought where it is rejected and where schismatic (and supersessionist) reasoning takes hold. Thus, Yoder’s emphasis on the “exilic” model of Judaism becomes non-non-supersessionist to the degree that he discounts and delegitimizes other forms of Jewish life and thought (most notably rabbinic Judaism, though others as well). Analogously, Milbank’s triumphalist Christianity—through its narration of one form of Christian realism as the sole legitimate response to Derridean deconstruction—ignores the possibility of a “meantime soteriology” that understands “God’s fulfilling historical time again and again, but within the contexts of historically and spatiotemporally particular worlds” (AR, 252). The irony that Yoder (because of his pacifism) and Milbank (because of his “ontology of peace”) find themselves caught up within a logic of war should give us pause.

Substantively, there are three related problems that Ochs locates within the logic of schism:

- First, the refusal of vagueness creates a dyadic split within scriptural interpretation, leading readers to oppose God’s covenant with Israel (and the raising of Israel from the death of slavery in Egypt) to God’s new covenant in Christ (and the raising of Jesus from the dead). Supersessionism begins in a dyadic splitting of two covenants, rather than interpreting them as two differing, non-contradictory relations within one covenant.

- Second, a schismatic logic does not treat the diverse forms of life within the Christian tradition as different moments or movements of the spirit, or, one could say, as different forms of discipleship to Christ. This reductive view of tradition leads to the tendency to substantialize and de-temporalize God’s activity in the world.

- Third, schismatic logic treats the world as something that is over against the redemptive journey of the people of God. The world is to be redeemed, but is not an agent in the process of redemption. Such strong church/world distinctions may make it more difficult to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit in the world, or to adequately attend to the cries of those who are suffering.

These deficiencies all work to constrain practices of reparative reasoning, foreclosing avenues of interpretation that could have redemptive potential for the repair of the church and its relation to Israel and to the world. Despite the real limits and flaws with which they were practiced, the problem with Yoder writing off traditional interpretive practices is that he ignores how these traditions and habits of reading could be taken up again and serve as new sources for inspiration and repair in the church’s life in the future.

Postliberalism illuminates these deficiencies of schismatic logic because it enables a form of unity rooted in vagueness. While addressed throughout the book, the first and second deficiencies are most evident in light of Ochs’ discussion of Jenson and Lindbeck, whose work
offers ways to repair these tendencies. Schism’s third deficiency, with regard to its understanding of the world, is most apparent in light of the reparative work of Daniel Hardy and David Ford. Because postliberalism endeavors to recover a plurality of hermeneutical approaches from the Christian tradition (as well as, perhaps to a lesser degree, from contemporary practice), a schismatic approach that prevents such integration is inconsistent with postliberal theology. Ochs references how, for Peirce, traditions bear within themselves the resources for their own repair; postliberalism attempts to enact such ressourcement and then to improvise new possibilities on the basis of such retrieval.

III. Re-engaging Hauerwas and Yoder

For many readers who are well-versed in postliberal theology, the claim that postliberalism and non-supersessionism are correlative might seem almost self-evident. However, both Ochs’ analysis of the significance of this correlation and his approach to testing this hypothesis in the work of various postliberal authors show this to be a more complex thesis than it may initially appear. I suspect and hope that many readers will be puzzled and intrigued by his reading of Hauerwas and Yoder—emphasizing Hauerwas’ non-supersessionism, while locating a strong if secondary strain of non-non-supersessionism within Yoder’s work. I find Ochs’ reading here quite persuasive, but also quite unexpected. Given Hauerwas’ frequent identification with Yoder’s work and his tendency to adopt a stronger voice of authority and hierarchy in his ecclesiology (as opposed to Yoder’s free-church model) the distinction between the two on the question of supersessionism deserves some scrutiny.

Ochs’ discussion of Yoder’s non-non-supersessionism recapitulates a number of the key claims in The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited, the volume of Yoder’s works on that topic edited by Ochs and Michael Cartwright. The integral point, I think, is Yoder’s claim that the “exilic” form of Judaism, represented by the prophet Jeremiah, exemplified the authentic form that Judaism should and could have taken in the post-temple period but did not. Such an exilic form of Judaism would have strong affinities to a Mennonite conception of the church, as a diasporic community that sets itself apart from its surrounding culture so as to serve as a witness to the world. One implication of Yoder’s argument is that because this was a possibility within Jewish life at the time of the temple’s destruction—though, as Ochs notes, a far more marginal possibility than the rabbinic model that came to predominate—it is conceivable that the schism between Judaism and Christianity could have been avoided. However, this argument also serves to delegitimate other modes of Jewish faith and practice, not least the rabbinic tradition.

While I am not addressing it in great detail, Jenson’s conception of eternity and time strikes me as integral in terms of how he rejects the sorts of substantial and conceptual metaphysics that limit divine movement; his conception of God’s eternity as taking place in and through time opens possibilities for envisaging variation and change within the life of the one church.

I would add briefly two analogues that may be helpful here. First, it seems to me that part of what Ochs finds valuable in postliberal theology is not just its recovery of tradition, but a) its development of a sense of unity that is based upon argument, and b) that it recovers tradition for the sake of renewing and revitalizing the church today. Both of these can be taken as analogous to aspects of Talmudic reasoning. They also have some precedent in the work of Hans Frei, whose theology sought in various ways to create unity between the Christocentric and ecclesiological/pneumatological dimensions of theology.
Though this vastly simplifies Yoder’s account, the logic here is effectively the same as telling Catholics and mainline Protestants that if they had all been Mennonites from the beginning, the radical reformation would not have been necessary. What Ochs therefore notes about Yoder’s conceptions of the church and Judaism is their unitary character: it does not allow for the possibility that different forms of the church and of Judaism could be legitimate forms of witness to God, especially in different historical and social contexts. This unitary position is connected to a significant degree with Yoder’s Christological focus, confining the Spirit’s work to a single pattern of fellowship and repair.

In this light, the contrast between Yoder and Hauerwas becomes more apparent. Ochs highlights the argumentative character of Hauerwas’ writing: his direct engagement with interlocutors; his emphasis upon localizing argumentative claims rather than generalizing or universalizing them; and his willingness to accept an eschatological, God-given reconciliation with his opponents. Ochs relates Hauerwas’ prophetic voice to Amos, as a prophet who helps his community take accountability for the sufferings that the community currently faces, thereby—in Sam Wells’ words—turning “fate into destiny.” Prophecy, here, is an intra-traditional mode of repair, responding to faults and taking responsibility for one’s history. These aspects of Hauerwas’ writing—and Ochs’ interpretation of these aspects—emphasize his theological, “apocalyptic” pragmatism (see AR, 116-23). Moreover, Hauerwas clearly emphasizes how the church should be the church in obedience to Christ, while granting the Jewish people the freedom to practice Judaism as they see fit; or, to put it in more Hauerwasian terms, as God tells them that they should! Arguments that create space for responses and leave open the possibilities that different forms of religious practice may be necessary in response to divine guidance avoid the schismatic tendencies described above. Hauerwas’ prophetic pragmatism thus distances his work from Yoder’s non-non-supersessionism.

I find this distinction persuasive and significant, in part because its reading of Hauerwas counters his reputation as a sectarian pugilist. Moreover, Ochs’ argument points to important areas in which Hauerwas makes advances on Yoder’s ecclesiology, even while following in his non-Constantinian thinking. I am left wondering, however, about the rhetorical approach to Yoder in this book. Ochs’ criticism of Yoder is less sparing than the criticism of other authors in the book. Ochs offers a generous, inclusive reading of Hauerwas, and he even proposes such a reading of Milbank as a way that Milbank could avoid his own stated supersessionist commitments. Given this generosity, why not offer a counter-reading of Yoder as well? One way to put this—perhaps not the best way—is to follow up on Ochs’ own remark that Lindbeck and Jenson both are engaged in renewing the Lutheran reformation, while Ford, Hardy, and the “theo-pragmatist” Milbank offer a renewal of Anglicanism. The postliberal reformation would thus seem to be a reformation of mainline and evangelical Protestantism. There seems to be some tension—or at least some distance—between the major facets of postliberal theology and the radical reformation. Is a pragmatist, postliberal renewal of the radical Reformation possible?


6 One caveat: the generous counter-reading of Yoder might, in reality, be the chapter on Hauerwas. Or, for that matter, Michael Cartwright’s afterword to The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited could also serve as such.
IV. Can the Two Wings Beat Together?

The structure of *Another Reformation* emphasizes the polarity within postliberal theology between the Christological emphasis of American postliberals and the pneumatological focus of British postliberalism. In Ochs’ words, “Either side…tends to place greater emphasis on one person of the Trinity rather than the others, and the choice reflects either side’s sense of which person is most neglected by the mediating or modernist trends in its neighborhood” (*AR*, 28). He distinguishes his subjects in these ways for several reasons: to attend to how they respond to problematics in different social, historical, and theological contexts; to highlight the differences between them with respect to dialogue with Jews and Muslims (and, specifically, with respect to Scriptural Reasoning); and to highlight differences in how they engage in reparative reasoning in response to suffering. This Trinitarian characterization also allows Ochs to position American and Anglican postliberalism as “wings” providing alternative yet mutually supportive modes of reasoning, though one wing may need to be stronger (the Spirit, as a bird, may “lean” one way or the other) depending on the sort of repair needed. I would like to scrutinize the relationship between the two wings (to the degree one can do this in a review) in order to raise the question of whether these two wings are compatible with each other—or if not, what to make of their differences.

One way to begin to think about the differences between the wings is their respective relations to Ochs’ pragmatism. As Ochs describes in the chapter on Hauerwas, his studies of Peirce have led him to maintain some distance from the Wittgensteinian conception of language at the center of American postliberalism7, most notably for Hauerwas and Lindbeck. As he puts it, Ochs thinks that Peirce offers a richer vocabulary and better concepts for articulating how change and repair can take place within a cultural-linguistic system (*AR*, 99-100, 106). Since postliberalism is itself the process of repair internal to Christianity, this means that Peirce would allow American postliberals to better describe their own activity.

While Ochs has also encouraged the adoption of Peircean pragmatism with his Anglican colleagues, they have not seen it as bearing such critical potential. On Ochs’ reading, this is because their work already incorporates significant elements of Peirce’s pragmatism within their hermeneutics. This is clearest in his chapter on Daniel Hardy, where Ochs reads Hardy’s typology as engaging in quasi-Peircean abduction (*AR*, 193). For Ochs, Hardy’s typological reading builds from Christology, enabling a transformed vision of the world and his neighbors. This mode of reasoning exemplifies the levels on which Anglican postliberalism has a more robust account of its own operation than the American postliberals do. In Hardy’s work, there is an emphasis on multidirectional repair, drawing from a range of resources within the Christian tradition. This expands the levels upon which repair becomes possible, working reparatively both

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7 As a side note, this is what Cavell has termed the “conventional” reading of Wittgenstein—one which, following Cavell’s work, Peter Dula, Alex Sider, and others have begun to contest within theological circles. Without going beyond the limits of this study, I would just note that Dula’s reading of Cavell leads him to an affinity with Rowan Williams, which suggests to me that a Cavellian Wittgenstein may be closer to the Anglican form of postliberalism than to an American one.
within the *ecclesia* and in its relation to other communities and the state. The chapter on David Ford offers a similarly complex description of his relation to American postliberalism. While grounding his work in Christology, Ochs sees Ford’s writing as “the moment where Christology breeds pneumatology and pneumatology breeds future Christologies” (*AR*, 201). This transformation into what Ford called a “singing self” in his earlier work happens as Christology becomes attentive and responsive to suffering in the world, re-hearing the cries of Job and the cries of the victims of the Shoah in ways that lead from discipleship to service.

All of this highlights the need for further scrutiny of the complex relations between the two wings of postliberalism. Ochs’ reading of Ford and Hardy emphasizes the centrality of Christology to their modes of reading scripture and reading the world; this serves to emphasize their affinity with the American wing, but also as a defense against charges that they are insufficiently Christological. Simultaneously, he highlights how their extensions of such Christological reading pose questions to the sufficiency of the American approach. It may be the case that in the context of contemporary America, Christology needs to be the primary focus of reparative reasoning. However (with a few notable exceptions), in terms of both philosophical articulation and theological commitments, American postliberalism seems committed to under-describing its relation and response to the world, as the underside of its Christological bent. To the degree that American postliberalism defines itself as over and against the world, it seems to foreclose the typological potential that Hardy and Ford (and to some degree, Milbank) represent. Does American postliberalism take shape in ways that prevent the sort of pneumatological repair that the Anglican model emphasizes? That would be my fear, and it would be tragic for postliberalism to be so divided within its own unifying project.

One way forward, then, could be in how Ochs presents the relation between the two wings. That is, he gives a typological reading of the two, with Anglican (or, better, pneumatological) postliberalism as a type of American (better, Christological) postliberalism. This does two things: it transforms their opposition into a relation of difference, and it describes their differences within postliberalism’s own language. In recognizing postliberalism’s reparative significance while generously offering it a way to repair its own limits, *Another Reformation* offers both illumination and compassion to its readers and interlocutors.

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8 *Another Reformation*, 192-4.