This remarkable book amounts to a hopeful proposal for collaborative labor. It does not so much demonstrate a thesis in the classic pro et contra fashion of disputation. It does, however, demonstrate a high correlation between Christian theological postliberalism and the rejection of supersessionism with respect to Judaism. Also, it does explores highly instructive theories about why this correlation is so. But, more importantly, Ochs’s book investigates and warrants a “reparative” hypothesis that enables nothing less than collaborative labor for healing schisms that betray the cause of the God of Abraham. So far as he succeeds in this, Ochs does not so much settle things once and for all; rather, he opens up for all concerned new paths of explorations for the repair of schism—ad infinitum to the eschaton of judgment, the Day of the LORD.

As mentioned, the hypothesis that serves this reparative purpose posits that contemporary “postliberal” Christian theology is not supersessionist with respect to Judaism in the lamentable ways that classical and revisionist (“liberal”) Christianity have been, but that it attends to the healing of debilitating schisms within Christianity that are thought to be rooted in the originating schism from which normative Judaism and early catholic Christianity were alike born. Presupposed, then, is not only theological liberalism’s critique of classical theological triumphalism, but also a contemporary neo-Reformation critique of liberalism’s triumphalism in Protestant progressivism: hence Ochs’s title, Another Reformation. To be sure, accompanying these hypotheses from the outset of Ochs’s book is a certain vagueness regarding what the “liberalism” is in postliberalism and in what sense(s) this current Christian theology is postliberal. I will try to clarify these issues by the end of this review essay.

The vagueness, however, is deliberate. Ochs wants to acquire the content of the term “postliberal” by a process of induction and generalization through the stages of his study, which are richly detailed and tightly argued engagements with the texts of particular postliberal theologians. What characterizes postliberalism thus emerges from the detailed study of a range of contemporary Christian theologians selected for investigation. They are selected because they appear to share a series of family resemblances, among which is notably the rejection of supersessionism. This is the feature that catches Ochs’s eye, who is a self-described Jewish philosopher. In the end, these postliberal theological characteristics are summed up as commitments (1) to undertaking reparative unity among the divided churches and beyond; (2) to reformation by return to the sources in Scripture-study and Scriptural reasoning; (3) to an ecclesial hermeneutic of Scripture as the ecumenical Church’s book; and (4) to a narrative reading of the Gospels as, themselves, re-readings of the Old Testament in the light of the Spirit made known in Christ.

The hypothesis that these methodological commitments correlate with, if not entail, the rejection of supersessionism comes with the following sense: because such theologians know the Israel of the Hebrew Scriptures and know Jesus Christ and His apostle Paul as Jews of this Israel, and because, accordingly, they also know for themselves the Jewish perplexity at the kerygma of Christ Crucified (kindred, as Ochs lays out, to Jewish perplexity in the sufferings of Job), they cannot but
see in living Judaism separated sisters and brothers. The gifts and calling of the Jewish people must
be believed to be as irrevocable as the Christians’, if Christians today are with integrity to sustain
belief in their own calling as well. This advance back to risky and responsible faith in a world still
awaiting its redemption reflects a new formation of Christian theology in the postliberal mode. It is
neither the old, all-too-confident dogmatism nor its liberal clone, the secularizing faith in progress;
rather, it is trust in the darkness, from within the belly of the Leviathan. As I have put the matter in
my forthcoming systematic theology, *Beloved Community: Critical Dogmatics after Christendom*,
Jewish perplexity at the “good news” proclaimed in “Christ crucified” must become a principle
internal to Christian theology itself.¹

By contrast, the “dyadic” (either/or) logic of classical and revisionist Christian theology—that if
Christianity is true, then Judaism is falsified, or that if Protestant Christianity is the teleological
*terminus ad quem* of the evolution of religions, then Judaism is left behind in the dustbin of history—
had to see persisting Judaism as a surd. Today’s post-liberals (George Lindbeck, Robert W. Jenson,
Stanley Hauerwas, John Howard Yoder, Daniel Hardy, David Ford and John Milbank are the ones
studied in this book) see in faithful Judaism a model for themselves today, singing the Lord’s song in
the strange land that is contemporary post-Christendom in the West. It is the veritable triumph of
Hobbes’s Leviathan, as Columbia professor Mark Lilla cogently argued in his penetrating analysis of
the failures of messianism and the ensuing, precarious emergence of secularism, *The Stillborn God*.²

I will return at the end of this essay to the term “liberal” as a fraught one that goes without
sufficient analysis in this book. Ochs’s pragmatism—shortly to be discussed—fairly cries out from its
historical genesis in the Americans Peirce, James, Royce, and Dewey as philosophy reconstructed
*under the conditions of pluralism and liberal democracy*; not accidentally, it is *here* that Jews and
Christians (and Muslims) are enabled to encounter one another as political equals and potential
friends. Attending to such “liberal” political conditions has something important to do, moreover,
with the ways that Ochs detects a definite ambivalence in regard to the rejection of supersessionism
in two of his selected theologians, Yoder and Milbank. This discovery would reflect the well-known
ambivalence of these two thinkers regarding the liberal order, as well as outright skepticism at the
very possibility of a pragmatic theological vindication of it as the best available option *hic et nunc*.

The reason to return to liberalism as a political theme at the end of this review essay, however,
may be connected for the present to the above-mentioned (and to this reviewer, most intriguing)
aspect of Ochs’s procedure: his hermeneutical adaption of a “triadic” logic from the American
philosopher and father of pragmatism Charles Saunders Peirce. (Though Ochs does not note it here,
the *hermeneutical* turn of Peirce’s account of triadic scientific procedure was made by Josiah Royce
in *The Problem of Christianity*, in counter-point to William James’s dismantling of theology as a
discipline in favor of the new approach of “radical empiricism” that we call today “religious
studies”—or so I have argued in the first chapter of my *Luther and the Beloved Community*³).
Peirce’s triadic logic holds, in brief, that the knowledge of an object constructed by a subject out of

---

¹ See the Excursus, “On Jewish Perplexity as a Principle Internal to Christology, in Chapter Five of Paul R. Hinlicky,


³ Paul R. Hinlicky, *Luther and the Beloved Community: A Path for Christian Theology after Christendom* (Grand Rapids,
MI: Eerdmans, 2010).
its experience is always a temporally and spatially concrete action with respect to some particular
distress that cries out for repair in the interest of the betterment of a particular community—that is,
for the betterment of the audience to whom and for whom the claim to knowledge is proffered. In this
“pragmatic” account of knowledge, claims to truth avoid both abject relativism and idolatrous
absolutism; they achieve a definite truth, but in situ and not universally. Historicity is acknowledged
while hic et nunc truth value is affirmed. An eschaton of judgment is posited as the reconciliation of
all truth claims made in history in correspondence to the world’s final state—theologically, its
eschatological outcome.

Using this hermeneutically parsed pragmatism as a template, Ochs investigates the postliberal
theologians to unveil systematically how postliberalism eschews as idolatrous any claim to a timeless
and unmediated intuition of the Absolute in order to know God instead as God comes to repair and
unite in space and time, as the Scriptures attest and as Scriptural reasoning within the communities of
the Book comes to participate. Knowledge of the Scriptural God is thus always also action;
orthodoxy is orthopraxy; doctrine is doctrine for life. That such procedure, broadly speaking,
underlies rabbinic Judaism, classical Christian theology, and Islamic philosophy is a claim that may
be tested and verified. As such, it may be further developed by the experiment, The Society for
Scriptural Reasoning, of which Ochs is founder along with Daniel Hardy. There, in the presence of
religious others in the new place to which divine providence seems to have brought us under the
liberal order, Jews, Christians, and Muslims attend with reparative intent to the historic schisms of
Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

Yet an historical account of Scripture itself, it is to be noted, goes lacking here as does a theological
account of significant differences between the respective Scriptures: Tanakh, the canon (regula fidei)
of Old and New Testaments, and the Holy Qur’ an. That lacuna may reflect the limited scope of the
present book, but to this reviewer’s mind, it begs questions that cannot long be suspended if the
experiment in Scriptural reasoning together is to develop and expand. What would be new in this
regard would be taking up such questions about origins together and critically owning the resulting
history together. As it is, however, Ochs begins investigation with the givenness of Scriptures and
their corresponding communities of believing interpretation. This suspension (Ricoeur’s “second
naiveté”) in postliberalism of the modern historical-critical challenge, which does not take for granted
the givenness of Scripture-cum-believing-community represents yet another facet of the problem of
political liberalism to which we must return in the end: under the conditions of pluralism, the
Scriptures and their study, along with the modalities of their study, do not belong only to the
believing communities. So far as claims to knowledge spread beyond the community into the space
of the political order—inevitably they do, even if that is not how they originate—they are exposed to
radical examination that questions the alleged foundations of Scriptural claims in divine action.

We have already seen, of course, that for reasons internal to the integrity of the community of
faith, Ochs and postliberals warrant Scriptural revelation by the more modest triadic logic of
pragmatism, so that the Word of God and the word of human creatures are not willy-nilly identified in
idolatrous ways. This modesty of faith that is not yet in sight might also meet external historical
criticism and fruitfully deploy its modalities of study with integrity. By identifying himself as a
contemporary Jewish philosopher, in any case, Ochs tacitly acknowledges this modern exposure to
the critical perspectives of self-professed “disinterested” scholars (in the words of the late Barnard
College professor Alan F. Segel’s stimulating work, Sinning in the Hebrew Bible), even as these
critical historical examinations loop back to work in communities of faith, which is a point that Ferdinand Christian Baur once captured in his well-known aphorism: “the history of doctrine is its own criticism.” Can Ochs avoid such critique? I think not.

To illustrate: given the irenic tone, it goes understated, but Ochs’s hermeneutical pragmatism ineluctably contains a sharp rejection of the Platonic ideal of knowledge as *theoria*—that is, as pure intellectual gazing that supposedly unites the finite mind to the divine in a timeless ontological fusion. That rejection of Platonism has not a little to do with the significant disagreement with Milbank to which Ochs is driven (242-5; cf. also 253-6). If I may cite John Dewey here on behalf of Ochs’s case: the “classical theory of knowledge” in “Greek thought regarded possession, contemplation, as the essence of science, and thought of the latter as such a complete possession of reality as incorporates it with mind.”

Dewey noted as well the assimilation of this ideal of *theoria* in “the medieval Christian period… [which] carried out under new circumstances the old idea that highest end and good of man is knowledge of true Being, and that such knowledge in the degree of its possession effects an assimilation of the mind to the reality known.” Not only does Ochs’s adoption and adaptation of pragmatism (a late modern corrective against the transcendental aspirations of the early modern “Cartesian self”) locate his knowing subject in the flesh, here on the earth, responding to cries of distress, but this pragmatic philosophy of the knowing subject locates Ochs’s project in broader contemporary critiques of Platonism. Thus, friction with Milbank inevitably arises, who wants his post-modernism and neo-Platonically tinged Thomism too.

Thus, some Jews, Christians and Muslims who have long since internalized Platonism in varying ways will surely find Ochs’s pragmatism objectionable, even if the present reviewer celebrates it. It may be celebrated, from my perspective, because Ochs’s rejection of *theoria* as the ideal of knowledge for theological purposes serves to retrieve and advance a Scriptural-Jewish critique of idolatry. This kind of critique makes clear that silence when one should speak in the name of the LORD is no less idolatrous than speaking of the LORD when one should reverence the Name in silent adoration. Here the idol is not merely or chiefly a finite representation falsely claiming to capture the divine; such is the purely apophatic critique descending from Platonism that Ochs regularly criticizes for missing the kataphatic descent of the Scriptural LORD to deliver. On reflection, by way of Scriptural reasoning, the idol is exposed here as the work of human hands, and hence it is exposed as the symbolization of human self-deliverance in place of reliance on the LORD, who first and freely delivered Israel from Egypt and who, as such, is not reducible to His relation with creatures. This is the LORD who faithfully works renewal from historical disasters in the same pattern as the Exodus by the remembrance of His Word in the Spirit’s community: from the Babylonian exile, from the destruction of the Temple and loss of the Land, and now from the Shoah. This alternate, more Jewish and Scriptural critique of idolatry comes in distinction from and in place of the philosophically dominant Platonic critique of images as twice removed from the aspired intellectual ascent to union with deity—a union that, for Ochs, can only be received as a gift from God the Giver in the gift of the Spirit, who is working *hic et nunc* for concrete repairs that remove whatever hinders the coming of the Beloved Community.

---

5 Ibid., 153.
Dyadic thinking, exacerbated by the foundationalism of Cartesian-Lockean modernism, correlates with religious triumphalism and Christian supersessionism. If repaired by the emergence of triadic thinking in pragmatism, a chastened modernism imagines and discovers new ways to live together peaceably. Under these conditions, “Disagreement justifies disagreement in response, but it is no warrant for more than disagreement” (70). That is one “peaceable” way to envision thinking about the persisting differences between communities of faith and their Scriptures. Christian supersessionism, by contrast, injures not only Jews; in smearing Jews, it also maims Christians, for as Ochs reads Jenson, it “breaks Israel’s hermeneutic and thereby obstructs the hermeneutical claim of the New Testament in relation to the Old: replacing not only Israel with the church but also the church’s scriptural claim on Israel with the pronouncements of some new religion “that knew not Jacob” and had no means of reasoning any long with Jacob” (70). The ongoing permutation of North American liberal Protestantism into Gnosticism (following, in inverse image, American fundamentalism’s antecedent “left-behind” pre-millennialism, a Gnosticism wrapped in apocalyptic packaging) is evidence enough for this claim. The sappy, sentimental good God of Jesus set off from the wrathful God of the Jews is and remains, incredibly but truly, the vicious trope of liberal Protestantism’s “antisemitism of a higher order.”

In this connection, I note with pleasure Ochs’s observation that North American “Lutheran theologians are disproportionately represented among the strongest Christian critics of supersessionism and the strongest advocates of deep theological engagement with Judaism” (71. I am grateful to count myself among these, but we should also note Ochs’s equally acute observation that the Lutheran or Barthian Christological focus of American postliberalism makes Christian engagement with Islam all the more difficult: how ever could orthodox Christians acknowledge a Scripture and community that arose in express criticism of its Trinitarian/Christological claims for Incarnation, not to mention the saving cross of the Incarnate One? The irony here, that Christian supersessionism in regard to Judaism is visited back upon Christianity by Islam, is in turn painful to contemplate, but it is a necessary penance. However, Ochs’s discussion of British postliberalism’s more Pneumatological focus helpfully illumines how Christians might see genuine marks of holiness in non-Christians; British postliberalism thus finds Christian friendship with Muslims a theologically grounded possibility—just as the holy Qur’an in turn, I would note, presents Jesus born from the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. Surely that is something worth talking about! Yet just here acute differences must emerge and eventually engage Ochs’s Abrahamic project of Scriptural reasoning in the company of one another, if it is to be more than a reflex of political liberalism—that is, if it is to work the reparative work of God: tikkum olam, as Ochs prayerfully and hopefully concludes this impressive summons to walking together on paths of true holiness.

Thus, I too conclude by pointing again to the political condition for the possibility of Ochs’s project in political liberalism. Among some of the theologians studied in this book, such dependence on liberalism is a hard pill to swallow. Their critiques of modernism are sweeping, indeed categorical tales of how the West lost its story (beginning with Duns Scotus!), forgetting that leaving behind stories of Christian triumphalism-cum-anti-Judaism as rejected possibilities is in fact wholesome progress toward the Beloved Community of God. Anglican theologian Ephraim Radner has reminded us again and again that political liberalism today is imposed upon “us wicked Christians” (Luther) as a penitential discipline on account of the crimes of Christian violence, which are also sins against the Christian claim to truth. Mark Lilla, previously mentioned and herewith recommended, rightly
chastises the fanaticism of the secular and religious alike who are still lusting after the absolute in time, of which the recent century was filled. Salient here, as Lilla might recognize (for the “Stillborn God” turns out to be that sappy, sentimental deity of Gnosticizing liberal Protestantism that inspires none but a small, academic elite), is the parable Jesus tells in Luke about a person delivered from a demon but who did nothing to fill the resulting void, so that the expelled demon sought out seven worse than itself and returned to fill the vacancy in the person’s soul. And the latter state was worse than the first. What can fill the vacancy of life between the times is not false claims to intuit and possess the End, but true faith that learns the patiency of life together on the way to the End of Days by hearing the Scriptural promises of God. For Christians, as all the postliberals affirm, that would surely take place as the Eucharistic assembly that proclaims the Lord’s death until He comes again.

Alongside that work in the Spirit, pragmatic (not absolute or fanatical) defenses of the contemporary liberal order in the fashion once made in America by Reinhold Niebuhr hardly mean that Jewish, Christian, or Islamic thought today should muffle prophetic critique of the sovereign self of Cartesian-Kantian modernity. Think only, for example, of the penetrating analyses of the Muslim Talal Asad,6 or the post-Marxist Paulinist Giorgio Agamben!7 Indeed, in religious perspective, liberalism is an ad hoc and fragile ecology beset with its own internal contradictions and ready temptations to self-idolatry; it is very much in need of the reparative therapies Ochs’s envisages if it is to survive, let alone prosper. Jews, Christians, and Muslims undertake these salutary critiques, “seeking the welfare of the city in which we dwell,” by delivering penetrating prophetic criticism that the liberal order cannot provide for itself. They might all the more powerfully do that work together as friends in prophecy that speaks truth to power. Such is the profoundly important work of hope for the Beloved Community that is ventured by Ochs in this instructive book. Political liberalism makes this hope concretely possible, but it does define it, let alone entail it. The hope for the Beloved Community of God is drawn instead from the deep wells of the Scriptures by those who reason prayerfully with them and, thus, also with one another.

The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning, Volume 13, Number 2 (November 2014)

---