Introduction to the Study Guide

This book calls for a revival of liberal theology with a radical vision because the author believes that such a theology offers deeper insight into the meaning and truth of Christian faith for today than all the other options.

Why “liberal theology”? Liberal theology is one of the great heritages of 19th and early 20th century religious thought, but today it has fallen into disrepute. This is partly because of the sustained attack on liberalism in politics and on the part of religious conservatism. The attack created a caricature of what liberalism is about in both politics and religion. The word “liberal” comes from the Latin libertas, and it refers to something that is “fitted for freedom” and “makes for freedom.” Liberalism is at the heart of our democracy, which is premised on the assumption that every human being is free and equal and has certain fundamental rights that governments are obliged to advance and defend. Liberalism in Christian religion gets at the heart of what God has done and is doing on behalf of human beings: setting them free from the bondage of sin and evil so that they may enjoy the “glorious freedom” of God’s children.

Why a “radical vision”? There is something intrinsically radical about theology because it purports to make assertions about God, about the ultimate meaning and purpose of things, and it offers strong judgments about human behavior from a prophetic perspective. The word “radical” comes from the Latin radix, which means “root.” At the root of everything theology discovers something remarkable: God’s radical freedom, nature’s incipient freedom, and humanity’s liberated freedom. This freedom is what liberal theology with a radical vision is all about.

This book has three chapters. The first chapter, “A Radical Vision,” introduces the idea of a radically liberal theology, positions it in relation to other options, identifies its marks, and explores its roots in the concept of God. The second chapter, “Contested Sites and Liberal Mediation,” engages issues of philosophical theology and cultural analysis, draws upon a deep and daring thinker, G. W. F. Hegel, and offers hints for the reconstruction of central themes of Christian theology at points of fracture in postmodernity. The final chapter, “The Freedom Project,” tracks the ethical implications of radical liberalism for emancipatory struggles, ecological awareness, interreligious dialogue, and contemporary politics.

Study Questions

1. What is your initial impression of the words “liberal” and “liberal theology”? What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of liberalism as you see it?
2. Does the word “radical” make you nervous? Do you think of a “radical” as an extremist rather than as someone who gets at the root or heart of things? Is extremism sometimes appropriate? Martin Luther King Jr. once suggested that Jesus was an “extremist” in the cause of love and freedom. Do you agree or disagree?

**Study Exercises**

1. Check the words “freedom,” “free,” “freed,” “root,” and “roots” in a concordance to the Bible. Look up some of the passages in which these words occur and think about their meaning.

2. Form two teams, one of which takes a “conservative” and the other a “liberal” position on a controversial question (political, ethical, or religious). Try to identify what the real issues and differences are.
Chapter 1
A Radical Vision

The first section of this chapter positions a radically liberal theology in relation to other theological options of our time. It defines the time in which we live as that of “postmodernity.” This word simply means that the political, scientific, cultural, and religious convictions of “modernity,” a period beginning about 300 years ago, are breaking down or at least need to be modified in light of new realities. Disagreement abounds as to what this change actually entails and what the best alternatives are for today. Some people want to embrace a new situation in which there are no structures, no valid traditions, no ultimate truth, no possibility of knowing anything other than that everything is determined by power, desire, and self-interest. Others offer a thorough critique of modernity and want to go back to traditional truths and values, either by means of critical appropriation or in terms of an uncritical and often anachronistic retrogression to simpler times. In between, there are mediating positions. Various labels can be placed on these positions, but the labels are not important. During the past twenty-five years, two theologies have become especially prominent: “postliberalism” and “radical orthodoxy.” As an alternative the author has borrowed one term from each of these labels and proposed his own label: “radical liberalism.”

The second section of the chapter identifies six marks of a liberal theology for today: a free and open theology, a critically constructive theology, an experiential theology, a visionary theology, a culturally transformative theology, and a mediating theology. If you affirm all or most of these marks, you are a liberal thinker and a liberal theologian. The last mark is especially important because it means that everything is related and thus correlated, for example faith and reason, tradition and culture, God and the world.

Mediation is required by the radix of theology—the God who is freedom and gives freedom. God alone is the one and whole truth, the only genuine source of freedom. Thus every finite truth and every finite practice of freedom is relative and incomplete. The radix drives thought not to an extreme or unbalanced point but to a nourishing root, an original source, an integrating center, a final end. Thinking about God in this way is the topic of the third and final section. Here the chapter draws upon resources from two greater thinkers: the 19th century German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and the 20th century Swiss theologian Karl Barth. The connection between God and freedom was central for both of them. They both thought of God as “the One who loves in freedom” (a formula for the Trinity), and they both identified Christianity as the religion of ultimate freedom.

Study Terms and Names

Many of the terms and names listed in this study guide (and used in the book) can be found on the Internet, often with amazing information; or you can check one of the standard dictionaries such as Abingdon’s New Handbook of Christian Theology and New Handbook of Christian Theologians, or The Westminster Dictionary of Christian
Theology. The best and most detailed source on liberal theology is Gary Dorrien’s *The Making of American Liberal Theology*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>modernity</td>
<td>Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>postmodernity</td>
<td>Friedrich Schleiermacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>orthodoxy</td>
<td>Ernst Troeltsch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neoorthodoxy</td>
<td>Karl Barth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>evangelical theology</td>
<td>Reinhold Niebuhr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>liberal theology</td>
<td>H. Richard Niebuhr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>postliberal theology</td>
<td>Paul Tillich</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>radical orthodoxy</td>
<td>John Cobb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>critical method</td>
<td>Gordon Kaufman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experience</td>
<td>Langdon Gilkey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mysticism (mystical vision)</td>
<td>Edward Farley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mediation</td>
<td>Sallie McFague</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>systematic or constructive theology</td>
<td>David Tracy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Study Questions**

1. How do you describe the cultural situation in which we live today? Is “postmodernity” a useful way to define it?

2. Where do you locate yourself in terms of the theological options described in the text—evangelicalism, postliberalism, radical orthodoxy, radical liberalism, or something else? Might there be some hidden connections between evangelical and radically liberal theologies?

3. Are some of the marks of liberal theology more important than others? Which ones would you highlight? Which ones would be questioned by other theological perspectives (evangelical, orthodox, etc.)?

4. Do you agree that freedom is an attribute of God? How does it compare with other divine attributes? Do we know enough about God to even talk about “attributes”?

**Study Exercises**

1. Study the eighth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, thinking about how it bears on the topic of this book.

2. Study or learn about one of the theological positions other than that represented by this book, for example, evangelical theology, postliberal theology, or radical orthodoxy. Compare where that position stands on a specific issue (e.g., the nature of sin, the meaning of redemption) with the stance of a radically liberal theology.
3. Read one of the chapters in Dorrien’s *The Making of American Liberal Theology*. If you have a group, let members of the group read different chapters and share what they have learned.
Chapter 2
Contested Sites and Liberal Mediation

The second chapter takes up what the author describes as the “pedagogical mandate” of a radically liberal theology, which is to free central doctrines of Christian faith from dogmatic or antiquated forms and rethink their root meanings in relation to contemporary conceptualities and issues. The most straightforward way of doing this is to write a “systematic” or “constructive” theology, such as the author’s earlier book *Winds of the Spirit*. Other excellent examples are provided by the theologians listed above. The approach of the present book is to look at some of the contested sites of modernity and postmodernity, asking how liberal theology might provide a mediation between competing alternatives that is not a compromise but a probing of the roots. With its orientation to philosophical theology, cultural analysis, and the thought of Hegel, this chapter is the most difficult of the three. The book is written in such a way that you can skip this chapter and go directly to the third. But before doing so, give it a try!

Here is a very compact summary of this chapter: (1) In the tension between heterodoxy and orthodoxy emerges a theology of God as living, fluid, shaping Spirit. Beyond the alternative of totality (identity) and infinity (difference) lies the possibility (2) of a wholeness of Spirit that preserves difference, and (3) of a narrative that holds together fractured stories in a history fraught with tragedy. (4) Through tragedy comes a redemption that incorporates suffering and death into the life of God, a redemption accomplished by the crucified and risen Christ. (5) Out of the tension between Christian identity and cultural relevance comes an understanding of Christ as the transformer of culture. (6) In place of the autonomous self and alienated other a community struggles to form in which each individual exists for the sake and from the gift of others. (7) Out of an inexhaustible religious diversity arises a community of religions that transcends any particular religion and entails an affirmation of religious pluralism. These mediating themes—Spirit, wholeness, narrative, Christ, transformation, community, pluralism—contribute to a radically liberal reconstruction of Christian faith for today. The first three mediations focus on God as Spirit and the second three on God in Christ. The last mediation introduces a new reality into Christian faith from the cultural situation of our time. The mediations are not fixed and permanent, and others are needed, such as a mediation between the material and the spiritual aspects of the world.

**Study Terms**

- heterodoxy
- ontotheology
- Spirit, Holy Spirit
- Trinity
- holism, wholeness
- narrative
- tragedy
- redemption

- Christ
- crucifixion
- resurrection
- culture
- transformation
- community
- pluralism
- paradox
Study Questions

1. Do you agree that one of the tasks of liberal theology is to “free central doctrines of Christian faith from dogmatic or antiquated forms”? If new conceptualities always need to be found, how can we ever be sure of attaining truth?

2. Some people would argue that the quest for mediation is false, that rather a decision must be made between incompatible alternatives, or at least that alternatives can be related only in terms of paradox, not synthesis. (See the discussion of “Christ against culture” and “Christ and culture in paradox” on pp. 52-56.) Where do you stand on this question?

3. What are some of the other “contested sites” in our postmodern world that need to be addressed by either mediation or decision?

Study Exercises

1. This book offers an innovative interpretation of the Holy Spirit and the Christian Trinity, and it invites readers to reflect on these questions and to work out their own theology of the Spirit (pp. 38-41).

2. If you are studying in a group, divide into teams and debate one or more of the contested sites (e.g., Christ and culture). Which (if either) side has primacy, and how are they to be related?

3. The issue of religious pluralism comes up in the last chapter too. Begin thinking about the challenges that it poses to Christian theology.
Chapter 3
The Freedom Project

The third and final chapter addresses the “emancipatory mandate” of a radically liberal theology, which is to bring freedom to bear on oppressed peoples, marginalized cultures and religions, and degraded nature, and to critique the political-economic structures that produce oppression, marginalization, and degradation. Here liberal theology embraces liberation theology in its several forms as well as ecological theology and comparative theology. The agendas that emerge from these theologies constitute a contemporary version of the “freedom project,” which is an inexhaustibly wide and never-finished project because it is a manifestation of God’s basileia or “kingdom.”

Liberation theology is a type of theology associated with struggles for liberation in Latin America and among minority groups and women throughout the world. It was first articulated in the 1960s, although its roots go back to the 19th century. The book looks at three main branches of liberation theology: Latin America and Asian, African American, and feminist. The contribution of several key figures is highlighted: Gustavo Gutiérrez, Aloysius Pieris, James Cone, Rosemary Radford Ruether. They are representative of a large group of thinkers who have had an enormous impact on Christian theology over the past forty years. This section of the chapter concludes by considering the present political situation in the United States and the question as to whether liberal theologies are truly liberation theologies. It asks how liberation might be obtained from the illusion of fundamentalism, the emptiness of secularism, and the ineffectiveness of moral idealism.

Issues related to ecology and environment are addressed in the second section of the chapter. The questions here are what freedom might mean in relation to the natural world, how God acts in relation to this world (e.g., are natural disasters manifestations of God’s “will”?), and how human activities must change to protect rather than destroy natural life.

Finally, this chapter returns to the question of pluralism that was raised at the end of the second chapter. Here the proposal is that liberal theology must become a comparative theology, that is, a Christian theology that enters into dialogue with and learns from other great world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam. In the process, Christian theology will be deepened in its self-understanding and enriched by new insights; and it will contribute to a community of religions that finds common ground—as well as productive differences—around the motif of freedom.

The book ends with an “unfinished conclusion”—unfinished because many topics have not been addressed (such as the terrible distortions of freedom that darken the pages of history), and because the challenges of today are enormous (such as the effects on politics, culture, and religion of a virulent antiliberalism). The author hopes that a radical vision will shine brightly in the works of the next generation of liberal theologians.

Study Terms
God’s kingdom *(basileia)*
liberation theology
Latin American theology
Asian theology
African American (black) theology
feminist theology
fundamentalism
ecology
environment
comparative theology

God in history
God in nature
theology of religions
colonialism/postcolonialism
dialogue
Daoism
Hinduism
Buddhism
Judaism
Islam

**Study Questions**

1. The chapter argues that theology should embrace the emancipatory, ecological, and dialogical quests of our time. Do you agree? What does this imply about the sources of theology and the role of culture in relation to scripture?

2. Do you agree that a liberal theology is or should be a liberation theology? What does the word “liberation” mean to you?

3. Should theology make judgments about politics? If so, what kinds of judgments?

4. In what sense are ecology and the environmental crisis theological issues? How do they relate to the biblical mandate concerning humankind’s stewardship of the earth?

5. Can a Christian really accept a diversity of ways of salvation and decline to rank them in a graded hierarchy? What does this imply for the claim that there is “no other name” by which we are saved than that of Christ (Acts 4:12)?

**Study Exercises**

1. Read one of the books by Gustavo Gutiérrez, Aloysius Pieris, James Cone, Rosemary Radford Ruether, or another of the liberation theologians mentioned in the text.

2. As a spiritual exercise, share in an environmental project in your neighborhood or in another part of the world.

2. Take a course on or learn about a religion other than Christianity.