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SUMMARY

These three studies critically appraise various aspects of postliberal theology and each argues that a fruitful future lies ahead for this contemporary theological agenda only if it is subject to certain corrections and moves forward in this or that particular direction. The aims of the three authors differ significantly, as do the sources of their criti-

cisms and the range of figures considered as representatives of postliberalism. Each text in its own way makes a notable contribution to the contemporary debate about the nature of Christian theology, its methods and proper audiences. Together they indicate that we are far from finished harvesting and discerning the fruit of postliberal theology.

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RÉSUMÉ

Ces trois études font une évaluation critique de divers aspects de la théologie post-libérale. Chacun des auteurs tente de montrer que ce projet théologique contemporain n'aura de futur fructueux que s'il reçoit certaines corrections et est engagé plus avant dans telle ou telle direction. Les trois auteurs poursuivent des buts différents. Leurs critiques ne sont pas non plus motivées par

les mêmes raisons et leur appréciation diffère quant aux théologiens qu'on peut considérer comme représentatifs du post-libéralisme. Chacun apporte à sa manière une contribution importante au débat contemporain sur la nature de la théologie chrétienne, sur ses méthodes et ses destinataires. Cet ensemble d'ouvrages montre que nous n'avons pas fini de moissonner ou de discerner les fruits de la théologie postlibérale.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Diese drei Studien werten kritisch verschiedene Aspekte postliberaler Theologie aus. Jede Studie argumentiert, dass nur dann eine fruchtbare Zukunft vor diesem gegenwärtigen theologischen Programm liegt, wenn sie sich bestimmten Korrekturen unterzieht und sich in bestimmte Richtungen entwickelt. Die Absichten der drei Autoren unterscheiden sich erheblich, ebenso wie die

Quellen ihrer Kritiken und das Spektrum von Personen, die als Repräsentanten des Postliberalismus' angesehen werden. Jeder Text trägt auf seine Weise bemerkenswert zur gegenwärtigen Debatte über das Wesen christlicher Theologie, ihre Methoden und angemessene Zuhörerkreise bei. Zusammen zeigen sie an, dass wir weit davon entfernt sind, die Früchte postliberaler Theologie abschließend geerntet und sortiert zu haben.

* * * *

Pecknold's offering focuses upon the contribution of one leading postliberal figure, namely George Lindbeck. It argues that the character and enduring merit of Lindbeck's project – programmatically set forth in *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984) – are best appreciated when understood as a particular kind of theological pragmatism. His demonstration of this takes several steps. The opening chapter offers an extended commentary on *The Nature of Doctrine*, drawing attention to those aspects of its argument which are particularly pragmatic, and which hitherto have not always been emphasised. Indeed, Lindbeck is said to propose a 'practical soteriology of language', where language is redeemed and made whole *through* the good performance of that discourse' (26). Lindbeck's work along these lines, with its strong debts to Wittgenstein and problematically dyadic character is not thought to be entirely viable as it stands, and the subsequent two chapters go on to 'supplement' and 'repair' it. In chapter two, Pecknold argues that Augustine's famous account of 'things and signs' and his prescription of the interpretive 'rule of charity' in *De Doctrina Christiana*, together with his autobiographical telling of the impact of reading given in his *Confessions*, provides a substantive theological warrant for pursuing a kind of 'scriptural pragmatism.' The meaning and import of what is read of the Bible in the church and its effect upon those who read it is best grasped by a thinking theologian about the complex *practices* of reading. But grasping this requires a move from dyadic to triadic modes of thought, something accomplished by taking up the Augustinian logic of mediation, reconciliation of redemption into the self-understanding of theology. This ancient impulse from Augustine then finds its contemporary theorist in the work of Peter Ochs, a leading contemporary Jewish philosopher, whose work is the focus of chapter three. This chapter is the most technical and demanding to read, as it examines the peculiar way in which Ochs brings to bear the pragmatic philosophy of C.S. Peirce upon the question of the reading and interpretation of the scripture along the triadic Augustinian lines already advocated. Ochs himself sees Lindbeck as a fellow traveler, and Pecknold here aims to demonstrate why this should be so. That this *should* be so, that Christian theologians and Rabbis (and others) should be brought together into fruitful exchange on the basis of a shared understanding of the pragmatics of reading – and the reading of scripture in particular – is Pecknold's conviction, as the book's con-

clusion makes clear. Far from being a dangerously sectarian enterprise (pace Gustafson and others), Lindbeck's vision of postliberal theology, when read in this pragmatic direction, opens out faithfully towards the world: along the trajectory from Lindbeck's own pragmatism, through Augustine's 'theosemiotics' to the scriptural pragmatism or 'scriptural reasoning' advocated by Ochs, the postliberal slogan that the Bible and Christian discourse must 'absorb the world' modulates into the imperative that the practice of Christian life with and from the scriptures must lead to 'conversation' with the world for the sake of its 'repair' and 'transformation'. Thus, when Pecknold describes postliberals as 'the ones who remember, and also discover anew, the wisdom and logic of the scriptures as they face the material problems of the day in conversation with their religious and secular neighbours,' his claim is that theology done in this vein can and ought to engender and sustain a kind of orthodox Christian humanism, as was true of Lindbeck himself (111).

Given the focus and relative brevity of Pecknold's book it is hard, in particular, to adjudge the ultimate propriety of recourse to C.S. Peirce's pragmatic philosophy within Christian theology. Those who are sufficiently worried or tantalised (or both, as I am) by this prospect will want to take up Ochs's technical study, *Pierce, Pragmatism and the Logic of Scripture* (Cambridge, 1998) to pursue the matter further. Reading that work, one might be able to decide whether the claim that Peirce 'maintains a commitment to scriptural realism in his pragmatism' (34) is more than just a playful exploitation of Peirce's description of the work of logic as a series of 'graphings,' 'engravings' and, yes, 'scriptures' (see note 264, 141). Reading Ochs's work would also allow one to scrutinise the seemingly audacious claim that 'Peircian pragmatism derives its logic from scripture' (64) and represents nothing less than 'the Gospel's law of love adopted as a rule of logic' (63). Peirce's once remarked that his pragmatic maxim – that our conception of the effects of something is 'the whole of our conception of the object' (63) – could be taken as a restatement of the adage, 'by their fruits you shall know them' (Matt 7:16). Can the case for the 'fit' between a Christian theological account of scripture and contemporary pragmatism be hung upon so tenuous a thread? Perhaps from further reading in Ochs, one could substantiate the precise meaning of the concepts of 'repair' and 'reparative thinking,' notions which are clearly crucial to this

endeavour, but whose meaning remains problematically elusive throughout Pecknold's book.

In contrast with Pecknold's tight focus on Lindbeck as an exemplar of postliberal theology, Adonis Vidu's study takes 'postliberal theology' as a rather broad church, embracing the so-called 'Yale school' (Frei, Lindbeck, Holmer), members of its 'next generation' (Tanner, Placher, Marshall, Thiemann) but also figures like Milbank, Hauerwas, McClendon and others. Moreover, its focus on theological method demands engagement with a wide ranging body of philosophical and hermeneutical issues and authors, chief among the latter Davidson, Gadamer, and McIntyre. Vidu nurses one fundamental worry about postliberal theology: namely, that its methodological commitments contradict what 'the material requirements of Christian religion.' For how can a theology committed to 'the pragmatist doctrine of the *epistemic priority* of the social forms of life' finally do justice to the '*ontological priority* of God' which Vidu takes to be axiomatic to Christian faith and life (xiii)? As he asks directly at one point: '*how may the prevenient action of God become significant for theology within a cultural linguistic*' approach to Christian thought (95)?

Vidu's study diagnoses several symptoms of this basic contradiction. The analytical pace is brisk across the six chapters which analyse in turn postliberal 'textual habitats,' hermeneutics, ontology, epistemic justification, doctrine and christology respectively. The opening chapters argue that, in the thrall of spatial or territorial metaphors (in/out, intra-/extra-), postliberal theology illegitimately reifies the actual setting of Christian faith, taking it as 'given' in a strong sense. This hardened view of church, texts and incommensurable tradition not only fails to do justice to the 'complexity of their inner dynamic' (243), it also conspires to insulate Christian religion against criticism, eschewing the need to justify itself at any bar, as *it* is the only relevant bar since '*this is what we do*' (83). Vidu rejects such an insulation of faith and life against critique. He argues that the very existence of 'typological' exegesis of scripture in Christian tradition itself shows that such closure is impossible, since 'figuration, which enforces the Christian claim to absorb the world, at the same time subjects the Christian discourse to external dialogue by preserving the identity of what was absorbed'. The upshot is to admit the necessity 'to open up the Christian world to external discourses in an *ad hoc* process of legitimation' (87).

But Christianity is not only criticised and dis-

rupted by external *discourses*, but also by the world 'out there,' which, while never available to us apart from language and practice, is nevertheless available. Theological knowledge is not simply the product of our making (*poesis*) but more fundamentally, also of our suffering (*pathos*) the incursion of both world and God. We may not finally, like Lindbeck, take language 'too seriously' (116) because our 'schemes' (of language, practice etc.) cannot be played off against, and finally constrain their 'content'. With this also falls any notion of incommensurability, i.e., the view that no justifying reasons may be given for the meaning of Christian claims apart from their coherence with one another within Christian discourse itself. Bruce Marshall's appropriation of Davidson's work in *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge, 2000) offers a way forward in Vidu's view, providing a 'good reasons approach' to the question of epistemic justification which ensures that 'argument and rational dispute are still important, criticism still a possibility' (156).

In the interest of getting the nature of doctrine right, the final chapters take apart a key postliberal distinction, namely that drawn between 'first' and 'second order' discourse. Typically, this distinction places actual performance of religious life including its various discursive elements (prayer, proclamation, scriptural reading etc.) in the first order, and casts theology as descriptive reflection upon all that, i.e., as 'second order.' Vidu sees here a 'symptom of the reification of religion' which takes first order practices to be 'alright as they are' and which constrains theology to speaking about the 'actual features of religion' (163) rather than about God. This in turn makes it impossible to distinguish theology from sociology or anthropology (176). Vidu's rejects what he considers the false dichotomy between first and second order discourse on the basis that there must always be a 'normative ontological context' or (at least?) 'a propositional imagination of an ideal practice' within which we may ask whether any given aspect of Christian faith and life is *correct* or not (176-7). Only an injection realism at this point can make sense of the classical view and function of doctrines, and hold open the possibility of reflective criticism of Christian faith and life. All this comports with Vidu's overriding conviction, declared late in the book, that 'to be a Christian is not a matter of performance but precisely of ontology: of some state of affairs which obtains between God and the human person' (188).

Vidu's study is highly compressed, and will

prove difficult reading for those unfamiliar with the authors and issues he examines. Even those who know this territory may find the movement of the argument difficult to track at times. But those who tackle it will win a compelling entry into some of the most interesting debate in contemporary theological method and philosophy of religion.

DeHart's book is a *tour de force*. It unfolds in four parts. The opening chapter tells the story of how 'postliberal' theology came to be, giving a crisp intellectual biography of the so-called 'Yale School' and the peculiar contours it acquired in the subsequent polemical debates that took place in English language theology. The point of this is not chiefly to introduce the main figures but to indicate the essential problem that stirs DeHart. For he considers Lindbeck and Frei ill served by the outworking of the debates surrounding their work during the 1980s and 90s. These debates focussed excessively on methodological questions to the exclusion of others, and also tended to orbit around a single text – Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* – to the detriment of Lindbeck's other work, and even more so to Frei's own distinctive concerns and contributions. In effect, DeHart contends, the initial heat of these debates saw to it that the distinctive projects of Frei and Lindbeck were fused into an unhelpful amalgam that came to be called 'postliberalism'. As things have cooled off, postliberalism has variously *disappeared* (i.e., the amalgam disintegrated), *dispersed* into 'several parallel or divergent avenues of exploration' like a 'river delta,' and been *displaced* by new currents like 'Radical Orthodoxy' (45-51). DeHart's detailed account of all these developments is incisive and instructive in itself, but his own aim is to clear the air of the 'fog' of postliberalism (55) in order to afford fresh access to the profiles of Frei and Lindbeck and to reconsider the central question at the heart of their endeavours, namely that of Christian theology's nature and tasks.

The second section of the work treats Lindbeck and Frei in turn, examining in each case the particular *dogmatic* issue which motivated their respective work. DeHart argues convincingly that Lindbeck's theological vision is driven by *ecclesiology*, and all of the various elements of his programme arise from 'an ecclesiological matrix' (61-2) often developed 'on purely theological terms' (64) in the 1970s even before his acquisition of the linguistic and philosophical concepts from Geertz and Wittgenstein. A very nuanced reading of *The Nature of Doctrine* follows, which dwells upon the details

of Lindbeck's 'regulative theory of doctrine' and the nature of theological truth as aspects of the life of the community of Christian witnesses. DeHart rightly stresses that the whole argument here is *analogical* – cultures, and indeed religions are said to be *like* languages with semiotic systems; doctrines are *like* grammar; the Scriptures are a *kind* of exemplary instantiation of the patterns of Christian faith, becoming a Christian is *akin* to being formed in particular cultural-linguistic group. The theological proposal itself is compelling to the extent that such analogies compel. In the midst of this *explication de texte*, what particularly interests DeHart is Lindbeck's claim that, together with applicability and intelligibility, faithfulness understood as *intratextuality* serves as the decisive criterion for adjudging the adequacy of theological proposals. This intratextuality has three aspects. First, it is semiotic, i.e., theology grants semantic priority to the Christian religion itself as the 'text' which is the source of 'normative descriptions'. Second, it is *'world encompassing'* or absorbing, which means that Christianity is taken to be a 'symbol system rich, variegated and reflexive enough to organize "totalizing" understandings of the whole of reality' (94); third, it is scriptural, for the Scriptures provide the 'publicly accessible exemplar of the originating or generative use of the semiotic code' (95). In all its aspects, the notion of intratextuality turns on the claim that there is a 'fixed structure of meanings embedded in Christian practice' (95), a claim which DeHart severely criticises later in the work.

In the case of Hans Frei it is *christology* which is the central focus of theological vision around which turned a lifetime's work on the narrative interpretation of the gospels and the nature of theology. As with Lindbeck, DeHart offers an impressive and highly instructive reading of Frei's whole body of work, from his christological and hermeneutical studies (*The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* and *The Identity of Jesus Christ*) through to the worked fragments of his typology of modern theology in *Types of Christian Theology*. DeHart's aims in this section are twofold: first, to examine Frei's programme in its own right, and second to show that the Frei we discover *en route* does not stand in such a 'straight-forward' relation to the project of postliberalism 'as has been typically assumed' (143). DeHart argues throughout that both the substance and tone of Frei's work is best understood as a further development of the programme of his own teacher, H. Richard Niebuhr, the pursuit of a 'generous, liberal orthodoxy,' liberal here denoting 'the peren-

nial impulse within theology for the systematically critical rearticulation of doctrine' (144).

DeHart draws helpful attention in particular to how the questions and concerns that shape the latter studies of theological methodology arise from and are harnessed to Frei's relentless 'dogmatic concentration on the unique, personally concrete and scripturally rendered object of Christian witness: Jesus Christ' (142). Hence, a key organising question of Frei's typology concerns which ways of doing theology can do justice to the literal sense of scripture and thereby 'accord the correct status to the figure of Jesus as the common center of Christian continuity, of communal self-description' (139). In the end it is the place of the literal sense of Scripture in theology which proves decisive for Frei, DeHart contends. The types of theology which fare best on this score are represented by Schleiermacher and Barth, and do so not because they are most best at intratextuality (i.e., Lindbeck's 'absorbing the world') but rather at *inter-textuality*, i.e., at negotiating the proper use of external discourses within theology. Frei understood that theology is imperiled on both sides: one the one hand, from systematically subordinating and 'translating' Christian discourse into philosophy or history without remainder, and on the other from having Christian discourse become 'Pickwickian' by forfeiting any and all 'ground rules for mutual discourse' among discourses (138). Frei contends that the kind of theology practiced in the space between Barth and Schleiermacher best succeeds in 'cutting one's philosophical losses' (quoting Frei, 138) sufficiently by properly ordering its engagements with the discourses of philosophy, history etc. and keeping them strictly *ad hoc*.

In the third section of the book DeHart moves to examine the oppositions Frei and Lindbeck set up in their respective self-understandings, i.e., he attends to how each characterises that 'liberal' theology which is to be surpassed by his own. He summarises things in this way:

Frei recommends a theology centered on *dogmatic* description rather than *apologetic* explanation, and one in which the relations between internal and external discourses are *ad hoc* rather than *systematic*. Lindbeck urges theologians to abandon *experiential-expressivism* in favor of a *cultural-linguistic* approach, and makes *intratextuality* the very hallmark of the theological faithfulness in opposition to *extratextual* 'translation' (151-2).

The pages that follow argue in great detail that neither of Lindbeck's dichotomies finally provides adequate terms in which to distinguish a 'liberal' from a 'postliberal' theology. In part, this is because they fail to capture the complexity of the 'liberal' theologians at issue, and in part because they 'skew the point' of Christian missionary engagement with culture (178). Most problematically, Lindbeck's dichotomies leave obscure what, DeHart contends, is the real issue at stake in the debate, namely 'competing definitions of communal faithfulness' (168). DeHart's own dissatisfaction with Lindbeck's programme becomes clear at this point: He charges that Lindbeck's 'directional imagery of "into" and "out of" and the accompanying notion that one must choose between them are such blunt instruments conceptually speaking' that they 'immediately send astray any more detailed account of the meaning of Christian faithfulness' (183). Further, in the thrall of this inside/outside scheme Lindbeck illegitimately transforms the 'logical priority of public semiotic elements' of Christian discourse in communities into 'an historically transcendent "Christian" semiotic system' (186) thereby asserting that the continuity of Christian faith and identity is 'something found, not made' (quoting Tilley, 189).

DeHart is also critical of Frei's attempt to draw a sharp disjunction between dogmatic and apologetic styles of theology as the key difference between 'liberal' and 'postliberal' theologies. An even more detailed explication of Frei's christology and *Types of Christian Theology* culminates in DeHart's judgment that Frei's interpretation of Schleiermacher is 'at the heart of the typology' and 'is one of the hidden but essential dynamic pressures' on the whole exercise: despite some serious material objections to his theology, Frei 'is determined to defend, with due caution, the legitimacy of Schleiermacher's basic theological intentions on the general level of method' (216). In so doing, Frei actually dissolves the viability of the sharp distinction between dogmatic and apologetic theology. This is because, as Frei's own reading of Schleiermacher shows, the vital overlap of internal and external discourses, and apologetic or correlational procedures can be exploited by a theologian for reasons that are 'internally heuristic rather than externally probative' in pursuit of properly 'dogmatic intentions' (220). If Frei is right about Schleiermacher, then dogmatic and apologetic styles of theology do not finally face off against each other in a 'zero-sum game' (224-5).

In DeHart's view, the only dichotomy which remains tenable under close scrutiny is Frei's distinction between theologies which pursue correlation with external discourses *systematically* (like those of Hegel and David Tracy) and those who pursue *ad hoc*, like Schleiermacher and Barth. DeHart believes that Frei thought this the 'more crucial' distinction between varieties of contemporary theology. The centre of Frei's methodological interest, DeHart argues, lies in the demarcation between these types of theology. Type three remains on the side of the angels, in Frei's view, because it honours the 'specific "irreducibility" of the Christian semantic network' and maintains that 'the basic elements semantically ordering the Christian symbolic network cannot be transposed without remainder into the terms of some other semantic order' (234-5) without sacrificing the primacy of the literal sense of Scripture and its unsubstitutable rendering of the identity of Jesus Christ. Frei cannot advocate for the validity of type two, because he believes it fails on all these scores.

On the back of all this detailed analysis and critique, DeHart concludes the volume with a methodological proposal of his own for theology under the image of the 'trifid of the witnesses.' DeHart's impulses here are closest to the portrait of Hans Frei he has set forth in the study. The theologian's way with the world is less certain than the many either/or's of the postliberal scheme intimated. In the end the Bible proves to be less a 'map' than 'pole-star... the stable point in ever new triangulations with the horizon of one's situation' (261) and theological 'traffic in "external" meanings... is not simply a matter of (perhaps optional) apologetic ploys directed to the world beyond the church. It is very much a part of the way the witnesses themselves come to grasp the identity of the one they are witnessing to... the way he becomes present at just this site' (259).

As already noted, DeHart makes much of H.R. Niebuhr's ongoing influence on Frei, and considers him to be an exemplary practitioner of the kind of theology Frei himself finally recommends, a theology in which the church's language stands in an open and experimental interrelation with 'the rhetoric of its committed environment' as Rowan Williams has described it (*On Christian Theology* (Blackwell, 2000), xiv). Whereas Barth insisted that extra-scriptural concepts and categories had to undergo the fiery judgment of the gospel – to 'die and rise again' at the hands of God's salutary revelation in Christ – Niebuhr spoke of 'other mys-

terious forms of the *logos asarkos*, not only in the world's religions but *in its philosophies too*.' (cited on 257). One's orientation here and decisions about the nature and degree of theological traffic with the world come down to judgments about 'how to understand the provenience of grace in the sphere of the creation of meaning' (259). Following cues from Niebuhr himself, DeHart thinks developments in this direction must be pneumatological. He concludes that Frei himself 'seemed to glimpse in the methodological possibility of "ad hoc" correlations a genuine Trinitarian issue, the demand for a cautiously "hopeful" pneumatology of culture' (265). Indeed, Frei is said to have come to believe that good Christian theology must hold 'in balanced tension a Christology of incarnational mystery with a pneumatology of culture' (268) and in so doing admitted the validity and crucial importance of the tension at the heart of Niebuhr's own work, namely that between Troeltsch's radical historicism and Barth's radical theology of revelation (271).

Common to all three of these studies is a desire to strengthen the 'realist' elements of postliberal theology: Pecknold by way of a particular kind of Peircian pragmatism which itself has strong realist inclinations; Vidu in pushing for acknowledgement that all practice 'involves a normative ontological context' (177) apart from which narrative theology 'risks placing the particular in a purely imaginative universe, floating above the real world' (245); and DeHart by insisting theology admit that 'conversion is itself a *cultural* process' (271) and thus attend to the 'multiplying differentiated responses' to 'inaugural rupture' of revelation (276-7) within human social and cultural history. But beyond this, all three also contemplate the peculiarly theological character of the requisite realism. Significantly, each in its own way raises the question of *divine agency* in relation to the nature and methods of Christian theology. Pecknold argues that the promise of Lindbeck's work can only be made good upon by a more explicit account of the role of christology and the doctrine of trinity in relation to the reading of scriptures. DeHart contends that the trajectory of Frei's best insights demands a more developed pneumatological account of culture. And Vidu avers that if 'ontology returns in the discourse of theology' (189) it is because 'theology is a faith activity whose conditions of truth necessarily involve God's action' (182).

Together, these authors agree that the world of Christian narratives and practices, of rhetorical and

aesthetic performance, of traditions and texts and their embedded 'grammars' is never as stable, never as closed, never as sufficient for the orientation of the churches' life and witness as certain lines of argument advanced by postliberals imply. On one hand, what unsettles all this is the sheer humanity of it all: the vision of the a stable, internally coherent and self-perpetuating Christian community at work in postliberal theology often impossibly 'construes the continuity and unity of Christianity as something found, and not made' (DeHart, 189). Yet, in drawing attention to the question of divine agency in relation to the future of postliberal theology, these studies also admit – some forthrightly, some more tacitly – that theology is most fundamentally unsettled by the disruptive and creative reality of God's own action. Perhaps, what is most crucially at issue in contemporary debates about

theological method is discerning how it is that the continuity and unity of Christian faith is first and foremost neither found, nor made, but is rather always *given* anew by the One 'who gives life to the dead and calls into being those things which do not exist' (Rom 4:17). To keep sight of this, however, requires that contemporary theology – postliberal or otherwise – always keep in mind the permanently disturbing implications of Tertullian's adroit observation: 'Christ called himself truth, not custom.'¹

Notes

- 1 Tertullian, 'Dominus noster Christus veritatem se, non consuetudinem cognominavit.' *De virginibus velandis* I, i, *CChr* 2: 209, cited by Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), p. 141.

Postliberal Theological Method A Critical Study

Adonis Vidu

The postliberal theology of Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, Ronald Thiemann, John Milbank and others is one of the more influential contemporary options. This book focuses on several aspects pertaining to its theological method, specifically its understanding of background, hermeneutics, epistemic justification, ontology, the nature of doctrine and, finally, Christological method.

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Justyn Terry

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