Liberals, Modernists, and Others: A Response

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doi:10.1017/S0009640720001262

My thanks to Maria Doerfler for organizing a session at the January 2020 meeting of the American Society of Church History on my book *The Fathers Refounded: Protestant Liberalism, Roman Catholic Modernism, and the Teaching of Ancient Christianity in Early Twentieth-Century America*, to the editors of *Church History* for suggesting that the (revised) papers from the session could find a home in print, and, especially, to the panelists for their insightful comments.

I began work on "volume 1" of this project—namely, *Founding the Fathers: Early Church History and Protestant Professors in Nineteenth-Century America* (2011)—to discover how early Christianity's history was taught in nineteenth-century American institutions that later became centers of graduate education in the field (Harvard, Yale, Princeton Seminary, and Union Theological Seminary): a book on institution- and discipline-building. Each of these schools was aligned with, or in close proximity to, a major university. Since America had nothing that could be considered scholarship in the field of history of Christianity at that time, the focus was on Germany: how to translate German critical scholarship on early Christianity to the much less theologically and intellectually sophisticated American shores? In *The Fathers Refounded*, a study in the possibility of Christianization's modernization, I dropped two of the schools that in the early twentieth century lacked a noted professor of late ancient Christianity and added the new University of Chicago. In retrospect I think that in *The Fathers Refounded* I should have restated more clearly that my interest in these three scholars and institutions (Arthur Cushman McGiffert of Union, George LaPiana of Harvard, and Shirley Jackson Case of Chicago) centered on their pioneering work in the *graduate* study of early Christianity. Focusing on these three, I am aware, might seem like an exercise in "great men" history, with its obvious elitism—a point that Gary Dorrien and Robert Orsi have strongly registered. It is helpful to recall that then, more than now, professors in humanities-type subjects *were* considered among the elites in American culture. The three did not necessarily represent wider currents in American religious life of the era. As Margaret Mitchell gently suggested, perhaps "three swallows" do not make a revolutionary heyday.

My lack of preparation for these projects is obvious: as a student of what used to be called "patristics," I had never done archival research before and had only rudimentary knowledge of the history of Christianity in America, beyond what I had gleaned from Robert Handy in my long-ago days at Union. Despite my lack of preparation, I jumped in. The panelists rightly have pointed out many gaps in my account and my failure to always place these professors in relation to "people's religion"—or, more precisely, in relation to people who were not like them, who were largely uneducated, and who espoused versions of Christianity that these professors strove to overcome. They were attacked by those who clung to a traditional and, I might stress, unhistorical version of Christianity's history: McGiffert was held by many to be a raging heretic. Professors Orsi and Dorrien are correct that McGiffert was not a strong social justice advocate; he was largely uninvolved in the religious and social worlds of Harlem,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640720001262 Published online by Cambridge University Press

although as president of Union, he supported such efforts, even if his response might seem patronizing today. He was more aligned with leaders in New York of Reform and Conservative Judaism, and of Ethical Culture, than he was with Black church affairs: these alliances mark different associations than those of his predecessors in that city.

As Orsi and Dorrien argue, Protestant Liberalism did not have much to hold it together after the devastations of World War I and the rise of totalitarian movements in Europe. I would also underscore that some of Liberalism's central *theological* tenets also led to its downfall: Ritschl's understanding of the "Kingdom of God" (as humans working toward its this-worldly establishment, a concept key to Liberalism's theology) was completely upended by his own son-in-law Johannes Weiss . . . yet McGiffert needed that concept for whatever modest promotion of social justice issues he *did* undertake. How to reconstrue the concept of the kingdom, post-Weiss and Schweitzer? As is evident from responses by both Protestants and (some) Catholics of the era, the "eschatological revolution" in the understanding of earliest Christianity came as a very hard blow. A close reading of McGiffert's sermons, essays, class notes, and books shows that he wobbled precariously between older and newer understandings of what was, according to the Synoptic Gospels, the center of Jesus's message: the coming of the kingdom.

Roman Catholic Modernism proved to be the most interesting aspect of the project, both because the material was completely new to me and because Modernists were challenging deeply entrenched theologies and institutions. If *Protestants* struggled with the results of New Testament criticism—and I would argue that they struggled a great deal harder than some panelists have suggested—Roman Catholic education, with its near neglect of biblical studies and critical historiography, left its adherents with a century's worth of scholarship on which to catch up. With the Vatican's condemnation of Modernism and the excommunication of some of its leading lights, Catholic historical scholarship was severely hindered until the mid-twentieth century, some might say "up to Vatican II." Robin Darling Young shows in her example, stemming from 1960, that anti-Modernism was still firmly in place in major Catholic institutions such as her own, The Catholic University of America. When set against this background, George LaPiana's critical scholarship on early Christianity was enabled insofar as he was protected by Harvard's president—protected from Boston *Catholics* who deeply resented his appointment and his teaching; being at Harvard, however, did *not* make him a Protestant, as seems to be implied in some of the panelists' remarks. It was unfortunate for him that Catholic Modernism's limited manifestations in America were squelched so soon and that the church of his birth seemed to him so out of touch with the modern world and, indeed, so corrupt that his affiliation remained very weak, at best.

Orsi's characterization of what counted as "good religion" for these scholars seems to me largely accurate—although McGiffert was not a "nationalist" but an "internationalist," a strong supporter of the League of Nations. He could indeed have learned a lot from Columbia anthropologists, including that belief in a "hierarchy of civilizations" was no longer an accepted theory . . . but the Columbia professors he hobnobbed with were philosophers. McGiffert retained a keen interest in the philosophical developments of his own day, as seen in his participation in the New York Philosophical Club at Columbia University, whose members included John Dewey, Arthur O. Lovejoy, and Felix Adler, among others. Philosophy was the university discipline that he deemed closest to religion, and that was still the case during my graduate days at Union in the 1960s when I took a battery of Columbia philosophy courses and wrote a dissertation centered on Aristotelian philosophy. Yet, as Dorrien argues,

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McGiffert touted a skewed, "textbook" version of Kant. Whatever his failings here, it interested me that McGiffert wished to bring Kantian themes into relation with Pragmatism, a distinctively "American" philosophy different from the European/German philosophies that Dorrien mentions.

Orsi correctly points out that despite these professors' claim to be "un-metaphysical," or "anti-metaphysical," they nevertheless strongly affirmed that their own "modern" time had a better grasp of Christianity's history than did that of their predecessors. Here, I would defend them: they *did* have a better understanding of it. For example, McGiffert strongly critiqued the Reformation leaders who, in their abandonment of Catholicism, had elevated the Bible to semi-divine status: only in the "modernity" of nineteenth-century German biblical criticism, he believed, did the Bible lose that status. As for LaPiana, Darling Young notes, he seems to have something in common with the much later "post-modernists" in his rejection of "essences" and of grand narratives of Christianity's history, his suspicion of the category of "experience," and his emphasis on praxis. Such reflections remind us that in our time, too, those scholars who claim that they have no theory, or are anti-theory, usually have some unacknowledged theoretical assumptions up their sleeves.

Throughout, I aimed to depict the three professors against the backdrop of "what they were up against," what they felt compelled to confront in traditional representations of Christianity's past. Thus, I analyze McGiffert by contrasting him with his predecessors at Union, none of whom (including Philip Schaff) can be said to have engaged in *original* critical scholarship on early Christianity. (That is not to denigrate Schaff, whose contributions in writing textbooks, in institution formation [including our own ASCH], in organizing the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series were vast—but he was not an original researcher, as he himself admitted). Here, McGiffert stands out: his work on Eusebius, on the Apostles' Creed, and on the doctrine of God in the first few centuries were genuine contributions. He taught his students to look to the primary sources. Today it is easy to critique the ways in which he participated in the failures and shortcomings of Liberalism and to forget his contributions and fearless fight against obscurantists within his own Presbyterian denomination. Likewise, for LaPiana: his writings on early Christians in Rome are still, today, valuable reading in the field.

My treatment of Shirley Jackson Case was probably the weakest aspect of the book. In part, this is because the Case archives, located at Florida Southern College, although very extensive, are quite unhelpful as to the content of his teaching—unlike the mountains of teaching notes left by McGiffert and LaPiana. That leaves the researcher dependent on his printed works, and these, unfortunately for my purposes, were often popularizing summaries. His knowledge of late ancient Christianity was weak; his knowledge of Greek and Roman religions and the alleged mystery cults was largely derived from others' research and from encyclopedia articles. Moreover, the subject he knew better, the New Testament, does not provide the kind of materials that would have allowed him to analyze the texts in terms of the social science concepts he wished to deploy. He would have had more success working on his own era, where he could have interviewed living persons and had piles of statistics at his disposal. Yet his development of the "seminar method" was a real contribution to graduate education in religion, even though his archive does not contain enough "content" materials to show how successful that endeavor might have been. Dorrien suggests that the University of Chicago could better be remembered for other, especially African American, figures who studied there. Yet, as Mitchell noted in her oral presentation,

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Chicago in the next generation could boast a professor with a more historically satisfying approach (Robert Grant); these later generations also continued the university's earlier interest in material culture.

Mitchell and Darling Young both comment on the relation of these two books to my earlier *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (2004): was the latter a lead-up (in terms of publication date) or a sequel (in terms of where the field might go)? I confess I had not thought of the three together, but in retrospect I can see that my readings in (for example) Foucault on discipline formation and De Certeau on historiography informed my books on the "church fathers" in America.

Last, Mitchell asks, referring to Hayden White's important works on narrative theory, can *The Fathers Refounded* be considered a comedic work (with an optimistic vision of the future) and/or a tragedy (where all goes down in ruins, leaving onlookers to search for meaning from the unhappy endings)? She is right: the book can be read both ways. The optimism can be seen in that late twentieth-century rebirth of "patristics" as a subject for wider, humanistic investigation; the "tragedy" is clear enough in Liberalism's defeat by the 1930s.

Again, I thank the panelists for their astute comments and criticisms, as well (to be sure) for their kind words of praise.

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