

Liberalism in the 19th Century

I. Forces Shaping Liberalism

A. Rationalism: Reason as the avenue and test of truth

B. Immanuel Kant

1. Possible to hold religious truth while subjecting Scripture & history to human reason
2. Ethical theory
 - a. Ethics w/o dogma (categorical imperative is rooted in effects on humanity, not the nature of God)
 - b. Religion is morality (Kant: Religion “is to consist not in knowing or considering what God does or has done for our salvation but in what we must do to become worthy of it”)

C. G. F. W. Hegel

1. Progressive development in history
 - a. Postulated an ever-forward, ever-upward progress in history
 - b. Karl Marx: A materialistic Hegelian
2. God is immanent
 - a. God (“World Spirit” or “Absolute Spirit”) is involved in history working out His purpose
 - b. God is part of history: Panentheism (“mutuality between God and the world”)
 - c. Idea of divine immanence permeated liberalism, as in the idea of a “spark of divinity” in every man
3. Theological Example: Ferdinand Christian Baur
 - a. Baur applied the Hegelian method to the NT
 - b. Saw Christianity as the synthesis of the “reformed Judaism” of Peter and the “Hellenistic Gentile” approach of Paul

D. Charles Darwin

1. Idea of Evolution
 - a. Idea of biological evolution in *Origin of Species*
 - b. Precedent for evolutionary approach to many disciplines (e.g., “history of religions” showing the evolution of Judaism)
 - c. Religiously → means sin/imperfection inherently part of the natural order
2. Idea of Naturalism
 - a. Provided a naturalistic (non-supernatural explanation) of the world
 - b. Influenced liberalism to propose “naturalistic” explanations of miracles

II. Ideology of Liberalism

A. Balance in Theology (C. E. Luthardt)

1. Restricting religion to feeling = mysticism
2. Restricting religion to willing/doing = moralism
3. Restricting religion to knowing = rationalism

B. Tenets

1. Immanence of God (bordering on pantheism)
2. Natural goodness of man
3. Jesus as a great example (e.g., moral influence theory of the atonement)
4. Religion as morality
5. Stress on God’s love more than His wrath or justice
6. Liberal postmillennialism (human-engineered kingdom of God on earth)

7. Christianity is the highest, or even final, religion
“God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross” (H. Richard Niebuhr)

III. Leaders

A. Friedrich Schleiermacher

1. Background
 - a. Pietist upbringing
 - b. Attempted to address the “cultured despisers” of Christianity
2. Source of religion is neither revelation nor reason but “feeling”
 - a. A deep, inner awareness
 - b. A source for elevating perception
 - c. A religious expression of Romanticism (appeal to emotion, to nature, to the non-rational)
 - d. Doctrine is irrelevant to religion
3. Specifically, religion is a feeling of utter dependence
 - a. “God-consciousness”
 - b. Place of Christ
 - 1) He had this “God-consciousness” in abundant measure, in fact perfection, but He was still human
 - 2) Christ is not the God-Man but a man utterly dependent on God
4. Sin is an imperfection, the “not yet” attaining to what God intends for the individual
5. Scripture is a record of religious experience (for study and comparison)

B. Albrecht Ritschl

1. Religion is practical → rejected metaphysics
2. Importance of Judgments
 - a. Judgment of fact: what things are (science)
 - b. Judgment of value: what things mean (religion)
 - c. Illustration
 - 1) Fact: Jesus died on the cross
 - 2) Value Judgment: He died for my sins
3. Kingdom of God
 - a. The kingdom of God, as Christ presented it, is a set of value judgments
 - b. Reflects the liberal postmillennial viewpoint
 - c. Especially influenced American liberalism—As in the social gospel, redeeming the institutions of society (Walter Rauschenbusch)

C. Adolf von Harnack

1. Climax of 19th-century liberalism
2. Wanted to crack of “husk” of Hellenistic speculation surrounding original Christianity
3. In *What is Christianity?* he distilled Christianity into three ideas:
 - a. Proclaim and establish the kingdom of God
 - b. Fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man
 - c. Love God and your neighbor as yourself
4. Disillusioned, like liberalism in general, by World War I

IV. Mediating Theology

A. Representatives

1. Historians (e.g., Philip Schaff)
 2. Theologians (e.g., Friedrich Tholuck)
- B. Goal: “Mediate” between new ideologies and traditional orthodoxy
- C. Accepted the Enlightenment
1. Attempts to hold to more traditional Christianity while using methodology of rationalism
 2. Not liberal but using liberal methodology
 3. Example: Canon of Scripture—“They tried to prove the authenticity of most of the New Testament writings, with the possible exception of the Pastoral Letters and II Peter” (Neve & Heick, p. 224)
- D. Significance
1. Accepts supernaturalism but keeps reason as a major ground of interpretation
 2. Often sound & helpful in particular points
 3. Ultimately subjective despite adherence to orthodox ideas