Liberal Theology

Peter C. Hodgson

The Expository Times 2010 122: 4
DOI: 10.1177/0014524610377044

THE EXPOSITORY TIMES

Article

Liberal Theology

The Expository Times
122(1) 4–10

DOI: 10.1177/0014524610377044
http://ext.sagepub.com
SAGE

Peter C. Hodgson
Charles G. Finney Professor of Theology, Emeritus,
Divinity School, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee

Abstract

Liberal theology refers not to a limited and now outmoded phase of modern theology; rather it is the distinctive feature of modern theology itself, starting with the Enlightenment and continuing to the present time. Criticisms of it by postliberal and radically orthodox theologies can be both appreciated and responded to by arguing for a *radical* liberalism that goes to the *liberality* at the root of the Christian gospel, which is simply God—the God who *is* freedom and *gives* freedom. Freedom applies to the sources of liberal theology. There is not a single, infallible, immutable source, but a plurality of sources: scripture, tradition, reason, experience, and culture. Interpretation arises from the conflict and interplay of these sources. The norm of all Christian interpretation is the redemption revealed and accomplished in Christ. The article identifies six marks of a liberal theology for today: a free and open theology, a critically constructive theology, an experiential theology, a visionary, spiritual, holistic theology, a prophetic, culturally transformative theology, and a mediating, correlational theology. With these marks, theology is made relevant to the contemporary world and provides resources for church renewal.

Keywords

Modern Theology, Enlightenment, Postliberal Theology, Radically Orthodox Theology, Radically Liberal Theology, Freedom, Scripture, Tradition, Reason, Experience, Culture, Interpretation, Critical Construction, Holistic Vision, Spirituality, Prophetic Transformation, Mediation

The word 'liberal' ranges across a diversity of meanings and contexts. The range is so broad that at the extremes contradictory ideologies are apparent. In politics 'liberal' parties appear on the left and middle of the political spectrum, and 'libertarian' parties on the right, yet 'liberal democracy' is considered the foundation of modern systems of government regardless of political orientation. In economics the term can refer to laissez-faire practices, to a 'free market' economy, or to a social welfare state. 'Liberal education' has another connotation, one that is oriented to the depth and breadth of studies, especially those that instill humane values as opposed to utilitarian skills. Despite these widely accepted meanings (and their ambiguities), for many today the word 'liberal' is anathema, a term of derision and caricature directed at all that is wrong in politics, culture, education, and religion.

There is also such a thing as 'liberal theology'. But what kind of thing is it? Some construe it as referring to a specific and rather limited bundle of theologians, who flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (principally in Germany, Britain, and North America), and who were soon displaced by new paradigms and more profound

Corresponding author:
Peter C. Hodgson
Email: peterchodgson@aol.com

insights. Others, however, including myself, construe 'liberal theology' much more broadly as designating the distinctive feature of 'modern' theology, that is, of theology starting with the Enlightenment and continuing down to the present time. It constitutes the broad stream, the mainstream, in which great theological ideas have flowed for the past two centuries, and against which conservative and orthodox counter-currents have erupted.

Liberal theology had its beginning in the German Enlightenment of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which demanded new ways of thinking about the relation between religion, culture, and science. Religious orthodoxies were criticized by philosophy and science, and religion was recognized to be a product of culture. In light of Immanuel Kant's critiques of reason, new foundations of religious thought, feeling, and practice were established, especially by Friedrich Schleiermacher and G. W. F. Hegel, two major progenitors of liberal theology. Most nineteenth century theologians were influenced by them in one way or another. For example, I. A. Dorner combined their ideas in a theory of progressive incarnation; F. C. Baur established historical-critical theology as the norm for treating texts and traditions; A. E. Biedermann elaborated a Hegelian theological system that influenced Karl Barth some fifty years later; and Søren Kierkegaard became the great anti-Hegelian. A neo-Kantian turn later in the century shaped the work of Albrecht Ritschl, Adolf Harnack, and Wilhelm Herrmann, while their student, Ernst Troeltsch, provided a new and more profound synthesis of liberal ideas in light of the devastation of world war. Barth, Paul Tillich, and Rudolf Bultmann were nurtured in this rich matrix, although they were critical of the cultural accommodation evident in liberal support of the Kaiser's war policy, and later they rejected fascism. Many German-speaking theologians of the twentieth century were influenced by them. Gerhard Ebeling combined the heritage of their 'dialectical' theology with the existential and linguistic philosophy of Martin Heidegger, while Jürgen Moltmann and Eberhard Jüngel drew more directly from Barth, Hegel, and post-Marxist thinkers. Before and after the Second Vatican Council, a stream of distinguished Catholic theologians, from Karl Rahner to Hans Küng, laid the foundations for Catholic renewal.

British liberal theology had its genesis in the multifaceted thought of S. T. Coleridge and the social theology of F. D. Maurice. An era of liberal Anglican theology began with Charles Gore's *Lux Mundi* and culminated in the work of William Temple. More recent British thinkers, such as Alex Vidler, John Hick, Maurice Wiles, and Keith Ward, have furthered this tradition and applied liberal thought to the dialogue with other religions, history, and natural science. A French liberal tradition counts Auguste Sabatier and Alfred Loisy among its founders, and it reemerged in a different form with the existential and hermeneutical theologies of the mid-twentieth century (Paul Ricoeur) and with Catholic theologies of renewal (Henri de Lubac and Yves Congar).

The great trajectory of American liberal theology has been documented by Gary Dorrien in a three-volume history. It arose with the Unitarians and transcendentalists at the beginning of the nineteenth century (W. E. Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker), was articulated in the singular genius of Horace Bushnell, was radicalized by the anti-slavery and early feminist movements, continued on through the academic liberals and social gospelers at the turn of the twentieth century, was re-articulated by the Boston personalists, the Chicago empiricists and pragmatists, and the Whiteheadian process theologians. Most of the leading American theologians of the past three-quarters of a century have been liberals, as Dorrien points out, even those who have been critical of the failures of liberal thought, such as Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr, and those who have recontextualized it in a more diverse cultural situation. Among the more recent thinkers are John Cobb, Langdon Gilkey, Gordon Kaufman, David Tracy, Edward Farley, Sallie McFague, Catherine Keller, James Cone, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Roger Haight, and the liberation theologians of Latin America.

In recent years liberal theology has been challenged by two theological movements in particular, postliberalism and radical orthodoxy. Postliberalism, as the name implies, is another form of liberalism, but one that has been critical of liberalism's alleged loss of Christian identity and over-accommodation to the demands of secular culture. Christ may indeed be the 'transformer' of culture, but culture for postliberals is not allowed a transformational role in relation to Christ, and the maintenance of cultural boundaries is deemed important. Radical orthodoxy, principally a movement of high-church Anglicans and Roman Catholics, claims to be 'radical' in a threefold sense: its return to patristic and medieval roots, especially to the Augustinian vision of *all* knowledge as divine

illumination; its deployment of this vision to criticize modern society, culture, politics, art, science, and philosophy; and its re-envisioning of a Christianity that properly values the material, embodied sphere of life. Protestantism in all its forms, from the Reformation to modern liberalism and evangelicalism, is judged to have lost this vision.

My own response to these criticisms is to argue for a 'radically liberal' form of theology. The *radix* or 'root' to which I turn is not patristic creeds and medieval practices but rather the *liberality* at the heart of the Christian gospel, and this liberality demands a critique of all settled orthodoxies, whether religious or cultural. Liberal theology is driven to its roots by the crises, traumas, and dogmas of our time. At the root of liberal theology (as of any good theology) is simply God—God who *is* freedom and who *gives* freedom or *sets free*. God *is* freedom, the One who 'loves in freedom' (Barth), because God comes from godself and is at home with godself in God's other, the world. Freedom means presence to self mediated through presence or openness to another, and the triune God is the perfect instantiation of freedom (Hegel). But God also *gives* freedom or *sets free*. God's freedom is a generative freedom. God sets the created world free from nonbeing, from its 'bondage to decay', and God sets human beings free from subjection to sin and oppressive powers so that they might obtain to the 'glorious freedom' of God's children (Romans 8). The central theme of Jesus' proclamation is that of the coming of God's kingdom or *basileia*—a metaphor that is appropriately translated by liberation theologians as God's *freedom project*, meaning the process and place wherein God's freedom rules in place of the normal arrangements of domination, retribution, and exchange. Here is the liberatory mandate at the heart of liberal theology. The word *liberal* (Lat. *liberalis*) simply means something that is 'fitted for freedom' and 'makes for freedom' (Martha Nussbaum), and as such it is a wonderfully appropriate term to designate the nature and content of theology.

Everything depends, of course, on what is meant by 'freedom'. Conservatives and evangelicals also embrace freedom, but for them it tends to mean principally individual autonomy and personal salvation. This is certainly a legitimate aspect, but Christian freedom, as interpreted by liberals, transfers the emphasis from self to other, from individual to community. The death of Christ signifies the giving up of self for the sake of other, of finding oneself by losing oneself, of participating in a larger whole. In this way we come back to ourselves, enriched and enlarged. Redemptive freedom means not merely a rescue from personal sin and evil but also, and just as importantly, a healing of our broken social order. Our personal destiny is tied up with that of fellow human beings.

Freedom also applies to the *sources* of liberal theology. There is not a single, infallible, immutable source, the Bible, but a plurality of sources: scripture, tradition, reason, experience, and culture. For most liberal Christians, the Bible does indeed enjoy a normative status because it bears witness to the paradigmatic figure, Jesus of Nazareth, without whom there is no Christian faith. The faith of Israel is immanent in and constitutive of Christianity as well as Judaism, so the Hebrew Scriptures belong to the Christian Bible as well as those writings (the 'New Testament') that bear witness to Christ. This entire literature is recognized to be a human product, but one produced under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Just what 'inspiration' means and how it comes about are questions open to debate and diverse interpretations; at minimum it means that God is involved in the process. Just as important, biblical literature is the product not principally of individual authors (St. Paul is an exception) but of a living community of faith as it reflects upon its own constitution and identity.

A constitutive literature is one that assumes a sacred, holy, status, but this status does not exempt it from the same rules of interpretation that apply to other literary texts. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, historical-critical interpretations became well-established, and a great deal was learned about the origin and redaction of the biblical writings. In the past three-quarters of a century additional interpretative methods have been applied, including literary, sociological, and cultural analysis. Inevitably, a conflict of interpretations has emerged. There is no getting beyond interpretation because everything is a matter of interpretation. The apparently simple act of reading a text is in fact inexhaustibly complex, involving presuppositions, cultural and theological assumptions, motives, prejudices, insights, technical expertise, and so on. This situation does not signify that truth cannot be known, only that it is known always relatively and *through* the conflict of interpretations. Faith entails the certainty that God is revealed and known—not as a suprahistorical 'beyond' but within the matrix of history. Thus liberals are skeptical of sweeping dogmatic claims and

unqualified pronouncements. They are *critically engaged* with biblical texts.

Viewing scripture in this way means that it is part of a broad and living stream of tradition, which includes creedal documents, biblical exegesis, theological and ethical systems, ecclesiastical and cultural history, right down to the present time. *We* belong to the tradition as well as scripture, and between scripture and us lies an incredibly rich body of resources, mostly neglected by churches in their preoccupation with biblical preaching. We have access to the Bible only through and with the tradition, and from the great saints and theologians much is to be learned as we face our daily lives.

Interpretations arise from the *interplay* of sources—not only scripture and tradition, but also reason, experience, and culture. Reason is active in the production of the original sources and in every interpretative act. Humans are intrinsically rational beings, and without reason there is no religion. Hegel claimed that religion and reason are what separate humans from animals. Today we know that there is no sharp break but an evolutionary process occurring over millions of years; and we suspect that religion and reason began to appear far earlier than did our specific species, homo sapiens. Humans are also experiential beings, constantly reflecting on and learning from experience—a quality that has given us a distinct evolutionary advantage. All religion is grounded in primordial experiences, collective and individual; but these experiences must be raised to consciousness, thought, faith, doctrine. Finally, consciousness has objectified itself in the creation of cultural institutions, which become the bearer and context of every human life. Tillich remarked that culture is the form of religion, and religion the substance of culture. Interpretation moves between these sources, correlating and criticizing them; and each new cultural age must create its own theology.

Liberal theology came on the scene along with the conditions of modernity. We still live in the age of modernity, and even if we call our own time 'postmodernity', the latter has for the most part only extended and radicalized the practices of modernity. In my book *Liberal Theology: A Radical Vision*, I identify six marks of a liberal theology for today.

1. *A free and open theology*. Ernst Troeltsch referred to liberal theology as 'a free theology of Catholic and Protestant modernism', meaning not only that it is free from the constraints of dogmatic orthodoxy and that it employs various critical methods that put it in touch with a broader intellectual life, but also that it has freedom as its central theological motif. This is why the term 'liberal' is so appropriate; it designates a community in which *libertas* prevails, a community created, sustained, and redeemed by the God who *is* freedom. The freedom of liberal theology is not only a negative freedom—freedom from external authority and the bondage of sin and death; it is also a positive freedom—freedom for, liberality toward, or openness to. Openness to what? To whatever presents itself in the Bible, in Christian tradition, and in the whole of experience—in personal experience, in nature, in one's own culture and religion, in the often-wrenching cultural transitions of one's own time, and in the great cultural and religious traditions of humankind as a whole. Confidence in the 'gracious liberality of God' (John Habgood) means that we can and must be open to wherever the signs of this liberality are displayed in nature, culture, and history. There is no single, foundational sign but, as we have said, a hermeneutical interplay of signs whereby truth, freedom, and grace are apprehended again and again by human beings in different times and places. For Christians, the signs centre upon Christ but are not contained within Christ. An open theology is above all a theology of the Spirit.

2. *A critically constructive theology*. Liberal theologians are critical of all established orthodoxies, partial truths, seductive idolatries, and parochial judgments. The practice of critical thinking goes back to the Greek philosophers; and, especially since the Enlightenment, thinking knows that it must turn its gaze upon itself, recognizing that all constructions and systems are but human products. Critical consciousness is a prophetic, iconoclastic consciousness, constantly aware of the deep difference between finite forms and infinite, inexhaustible truth. This is the Kantian element in liberal theology. It does not mean that liberal theology is indifferent to the truth and merely neutral, tolerant, permissive, or relativistic. By contrast with this standard caricature, liberalism has a deep passion for truth but also recognizes the complexity of the question about truth. It knows that truth is often mixed with falsehood, that deep insight is combined with blindness to prejudice.

The goal of liberal theology is not to destroy or lose the heritage of the past but to preserve and appreciate it; and it understands that this can be accomplished not by fruitlessly holding on to old forms but by allowing them to pass over into new and

different ones. This requires new theological constructions, seeking new symbols to replace overused and outworn ones, attending to new circumstances and new insights never imagined in the past. While such constructions are a human effort, if they are genuine and honest efforts and if we have faith in God's gracious liberality, we have grounds for confidence that our constructions are a response to something real that is presenting itself. Truth will come out through the testing of these constructions in a community of free and open discourse. In the final analysis we have no alternative. We cannot know the truth directly, and we cannot dwell humanly in the world without undertaking such constructions, fragile and fallible though they be.

3. *An experiential theology*. This is certainly one of the classic marks of theological liberalism: experience is the matrix in which religion occurs. Theologians must be open to the totality of experience: empirical, sensible, emotional, intuitive, intellectual, aesthetic, cultural, revelatory. Revelation occurs through certain root experiences that reverberate in history, are mediated by texts and traditions, and interact with the personal experience of interpreters and their communities. Experience puts us in touch with what is real, objective, powerful, abiding. Schleiermacher was convinced that the 'feeling of utter dependence' is elicited by the ultimate Whence and Whither of existence and is not a projection of a private state. William James and Josiah Royce came to a similar conclusion, as have recent pragmatic theologies. Of course, experience must be tested critically, and different communities of faith have different criteria for this testing. The criterion of Christian faith—its determinately Christian experience—is that of the redemption accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth and mediated through the church and the Holy Spirit. But this determinacy should not be understood to close it off into a confessional community with impermeable boundaries, as some forms of postliberalism have argued.

Over a century ago empirical sciences of religious experience began to appear in the form of psychology and sociology of religion and comparative history of religions. These sciences of religion helped fuel the emergence of religious studies in secular universities. A postmodern liberal theology must incorporate within itself the science of religion (including literary and cultural as well as historical, psychological, and sociological studies) as an essential critical moment, just as religious studies should incorporate within themselves a theological engagement with the truth- and reality-claims of faith traditions. Experience *critically engaged* can serve to mediate between religious and theological studies. The goal is to establish relations of *consonance* and *coherence* between science and religion, experience and faith, as opposed to a deduction of one from the other or a separation of them into hermetically sealed realms.

4. *A visionary, spiritual, holistic theology*. Vision entails an awareness and appreciation of the mystery beneath the real. It represents the mystical dimension of theology in contrast to its empirical, experiential dimension; it entails intellectual as well as sensible intuition, the ability to see or intuit or imagine the whole in the parts, the universal in the concrete. It requires a heightening of the imagination, an ability to discern and interpret figures, to create new concepts out of revisioned symbols. The central symbol/concept for such a theology is that of 'spirit', the integrating relational power of life and mind that comes from God and is God. If Schleiermacher is the modern patron saint of experiential theology, then Hegel and Coleridge are the modern saints of visionary, spiritual theology. The two strands come together in Troeltsch, clashing and fusing.

Theology can be visionary in both apophatic and kataphatic forms—both the negative theology of Kierkegaard and the speculative theology of Hegel. Its visions can be philosophical, spiritual, aesthetic, utopian, political, or a combination of these. What is called for in our time, I believe, is a postmetaphysical speculative theology, one that can articulate a holistic ontological vision, an interpretation of reality that connects finite and infinite, nature and spirit, psyche and culture, the aesthetic and the ethical, the personal and the political, and that does so in the form of an open, nontotalizing metanarrative. What is required is not simply a methodological or cultural-linguistic holism, as some postliberals desire, but an ontological holism, perhaps even an 'ontotheological' holism, which rethinks the meaning of *ontos* (being) and *theos* (God) as intrinsically *relational* (or spiritual) in character. We do not need a singular genius to produce such a vision, helpful as that would be, but a group of people networking together. Given the enormity of the task in the greatly expanded horizons of postmodernity, it is hard to imagine how any individual could accomplish it alone.

5. *A prophetic, culturally transformative theology*. This is the ethical mandate of classical liberalism, radicalized by the postmodern critiques of

socialist and capitalist cultures. A Protestantism accommodated to culture ('culture-Protestantism') is no longer a possibility for us, and the evolutionary optimism of its late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century expression was already severely criticized by Troeltsch. Troeltsch himself sought a new cultural synthesis, a transformative ethic of cultural values. His awareness of the colossal power of human evil and of the tragic dimension of existence led in his final writings to an ethic of struggle, patience, compromise, hope without illusion, realism without cynicism and despair. That good might, from time to time, be brought out of evil, that culture might be transformed, ambiguously and fragmentarily, requires faith in God's providence.

The same hopeful realism, the same striving for human freedom and flourishing often in the face of overwhelming odds, is a characteristic of the greatest liberal thinkers. Among the greatest was Reinhold Niebuhr, who, despite his criticism of the liberal tradition, stood very much in it and was the most prophetic theological critic of early- and mid-twentieth-century American politics and society. Paul Tillich played a similar role in relation to European politics and society (and later to American). He insisted that a critical-prophetic dimension must be present in every religion to protect against its own demonic tendencies. He called it the 'Protestant principle'—'the prophetic judgment against religious pride, ecclesiastical arrogance, and secular self-sufficiency and their destructive consequences'. Protestant religion and culture are included under the judgment. In the past forty years, the prophetic role has been taken over principally by black, feminist, liberation, and ecological theologies. Today liberal theology must also be a liberation theology. In terms of Richard Niebuhr's Christ-and-culture typology, it is neither the 'Christ of culture' nor 'Christ and culture in paradox' that fits this deeper liberal tradition but 'Christ the transformer of culture'.

The transformation works both ways, from Christ to culture and from culture to Christ. There are some transformative potentialities in postmodern culture, and the task of theology is to identify these elements, strengthen them, work with them, separate them from the cultural dross that clings to them. God's truth is being revealed through them. These potentialities are found in the emancipatory, the ecological, and the dialogical quests of our time. Each requires us to think about God, Christ, and the Spirit differently and with new insight. The transformer, Christ, is transformed in the process of transforming: this is what a theology of incarnation that takes seriously God's embodiment in the world requires. The churches for the most part have not been receptive to these cultural quests and have often resisted them, fighting rearguard battles against forces of change.

6. *A mediating, correlational theology*. Everything is related and thus necessarily correlated. This has been one of the marks of liberalism from the beginning, and it characterizes the work of its most creative theologians, from Schleiermacher and Hegel through Troeltsch and Tillich to the present time. Without mediation, without actual engagement in the messy realities of the world, cultural transformation is not a possibility. Mediation on the part of theology is often suspected from a postliberal or radically orthodox perspective of being a compromising capitulation to culture. However, genuine mediation does not mean compromise and capitulation but balance and insight. By refusing mediation theologians cut off the possibility of prophetic wisdom arising from culture, and they are blind to the tyranny that is often still alive and well in the church.

Mediation is required by the *radix* of theology, the God who *is* free 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. In going to the root, we go between mutually negating alternatives, recognizing that validity is found on more than one side, that it is never simply a question of God *or* world, of Christ *or* culture, of faith *or* reason, of revelation *or* experience. The *radix* drives thought not to an extreme or unbalanced point (the popular misuse of 'radical') but to a sustaining root, an original source, an integrating centre, a final end. Of course, what is regarded as constituting the root or basis of things makes all the difference, as, for example, between radical orthodoxy and radical liberalism. In the view of the latter, truth comes out through the play of differences and their mediation. God is in the between, in the mediation between differences. One version of this mediation is found in the Christian doctrine of incarnation, which is a fairly radical doctrine: God is not a static, transcendent beyond but is becoming God through interaction with and embodiment in the world, normatively so in Christ. *How* that actually happens is the deep question that has occupied liberal theology for several generations and continues to do so.

Liberal theology is related to many of the other directions in this Contemporary Theology Article

Series. I have discussed criticisms of it on the part of postliberal and radically orthodox theologies. Several contemporary versions of liberalism are found in the emancipatory, political, ecological, and pluralist theologies of our time. Given its impulse toward transformative practices, this is not surprising. Classical liberalism had blind spots in regard to issues of race, class, gender, nature, and claims of Christian supremacy; these have been mostly corrected, but undoubtedly new blindnesses have emerged of which we are not yet aware. Liberalism has played a major role in Reformed and Anglican theologies, and, to a lesser extent in Catholic and Orthodox theologies. It is the self-critical, self-renewing, self-reforming dimension of these theologies. Many recent theologians exhibit these qualities, although they seem less inclined to identify themselves as 'liberal', perhaps regarding the term as too general or even undesirable ('progressive' is used as a substitute, but it is a rather bland concept).

Some of the most contentious issues faced by Christian communions today centre around liberal challenges and conservative responses, or the reverse. Struggles over sexual orientation, gender, abortion, and ordination are discouraging, for more important issues face the church and the world: hunger, terror, violence, economic and political injustice, environmental destruction, secular materialism, loss of meaning and decline in faith. The world needs to hear the gospel as never before, but the churches are weakened by internecine struggles and the loss of public credibility. Young people are attracted to the ministry in decreasing numbers; and without strong leaders, critically trained and existentially engaged, no institution can flourish. The church needs to become a larger and more tolerant tent, encouraging a diversity of beliefs and practices that cut across old divisions and keep in view the *radix* of all good theology. If that can be accomplished, whether theology is called 'liberal' or not does not matter.

For further reading: *The Future of Liberal Theology*, ed. Mark D. Chapman (Ashgate Publishing, 2002); Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, 3 vols. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, 2003, 2006); Peter C. Hodgson, *Liberal Theology: A Radical Vision* (Fortress Press, 2007). Material for this article has been drawn from the latter book (copyright © 2007 Fortress Press) and is used with permission of Augsburg Fortress Publishers.

TELLING TALES

David Kellas, *Just Stories*, privately published by author, available from Cornerstone Booksellers, Edinburgh (edinburgh@cornerstonebooks.org.uk). £1.50 plus p & p. pp. 25.

This slim volume offers eight parables of Jesus retold by "an unknown disciple", written by a parish minister of many years standing for anyone in need of spiritual refreshment, including busy preachers who "may have sucked the stories dry and want to be reassured that there's still life in them" (p. 25). Interspersed with the story telling is personal reflection and biblical exegesis, offered with a lightness of touch which does not spoil the flow of the stories themselves. And the stories are told from a "slant": inviting us to consider the elder son as the "prodigal", squandering life's opportunities out of fear of failure; offering the observation that the tares are burned to bake the bread of life from the ears of wheat, with the comment that there are no weeds in the kingdom of God, merely plants with different gifts. Not everyone will agree with these interpretations- but no-one could fail to be charmed and stimulated by their re-telling.

ALISON JACK
School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh